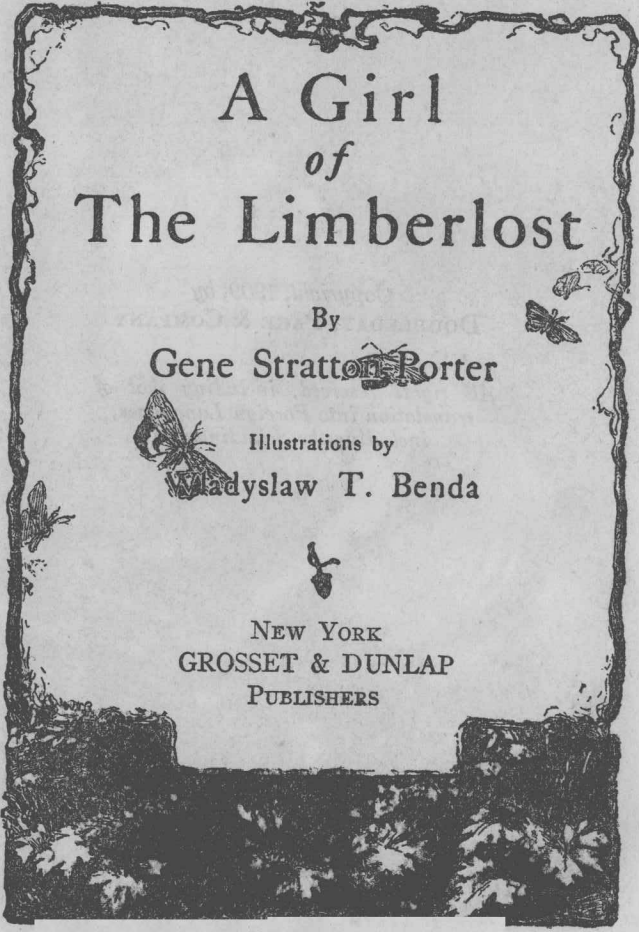


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A Girl *of* The Limberlost

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NEW YORK
GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS

A GIRL OF THE LIMBERLOST



BOOKS BY
GENE STRATTON-PORTER

The Song of the Cardinal

Freckles

What I Have Done With Birds

At the Foot of the Rainbow

A Girl of the Limberlost

Birds of the Bible

The Harvester

Laddie: *A true blue story*

Moths of the Limberlost

TO
ALL GIRLS OF THE LIMBERLOST
IN GENERAL
AND ONE
JEANNETTE HELEN PORTER
IN PARTICULAR

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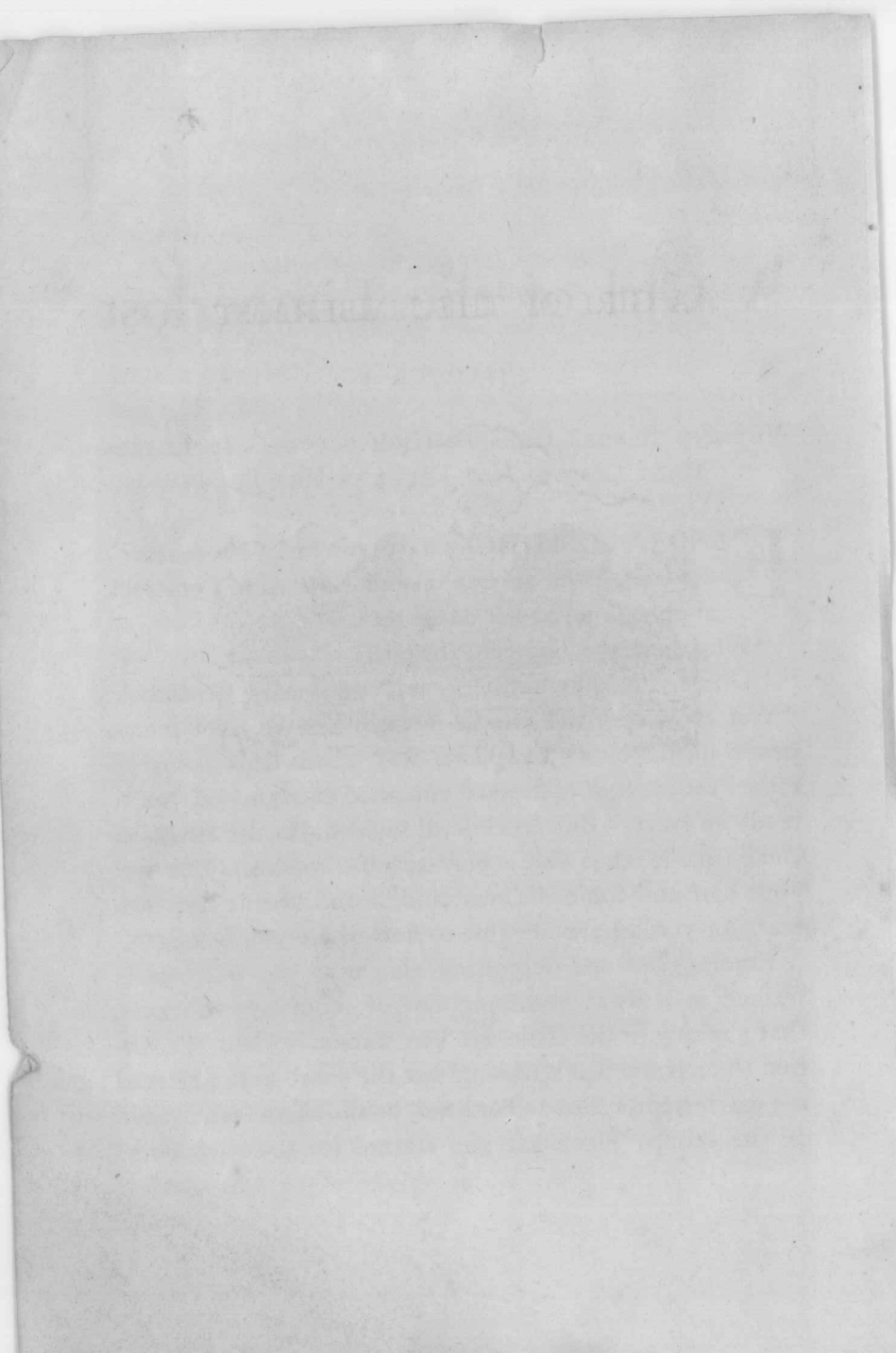
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A GIRL OF THE LIMBERLOST





A Girl of the Limberlost

CHAPTER I

WHEREIN ELNORA GOES TO HIGH SCHOOL AND LEARNS
MANY LESSONS NOT FOUND IN HER BOOKS

ELNORA COMSTOCK, have you lost your senses?" demanded the angry voice of Katharine Comstock as she glared at her daughter.

"Why, mother?" faltered the girl.

"Don't you 'why mother' me!" cried Mrs. Comstock. "You know very well what I mean. You've given me no peace until you've had your way about this going to school business; I've dressed you good enough, and you're ready to start. But no child of mine walks the streets of Onabasha looking like a play-actress woman. You wet your hair and comb it down modest and decent and then start, or you'll have no time to find where you belong."

Elnora gave one despairing glance at the white face, framed in a most becoming riot of reddish-brown hair, that she saw in the little kitchen mirror. Then she untied the narrow black ribbon, wet the comb and plastered the waving curls close to her head, bound them fast, pinned on the skimpy black hat and started for the back door.

"You've gone so plum daffy you are forgetting your dinner," jeered her mother.

"I don't want anything to eat," replied Elnora without stopping.

"You'll take your dinner or you'll not go one step. Are you crazy? Walk nearly three miles and no food from six in the morning until six at night. A pretty figure you'd cut if you had your way about things! And after I've gone and bought you this nice new pail and filled it especial for the first day!"

Elnora came back with a face still whiter and picked up the lunch. "Thank you, mother! Good-bye!" she said. Mrs. Comstock did not reply. She watched the girl down the long walk to the gate and out of sight on the road in the bright sunshine of the first Monday of September.

"I bet a dollar she gets enough of it by night!" Mrs. Comstock said positively.

Elnora walked by instinct, for her eyes were blinded with tears. She left the road where it turned south at the corner of the Limberlost, climbed a snake fence and entered a path worn by her own feet. Dodging under willow and scrub oak branches she at last came to the faint outline of an old trail made in the days when the precious timber of the swamp was guarded by armed men. This path she followed until she reached a thick clump of bushes. From the débris in the end of a hollow log she took a key that unlocked the padlock of a large weatherbeaten old box, inside of which lay several books, a butterfly apparatus, and an old cracked mirror. The walls were lined thickly

with gaudy butterflies, dragon-flies, and moths. She set up the mirror, and once more pulling the ribbon from her hair, she shook the bright mass over her shoulders, tossing it dry in the sunshine. Then she straightened it, bound it loosely, and replaced her hat. She tugged vainly at the low brown calico collar and gazed despairingly at the generous length of the narrow skirt. She lifted it as she would have liked it to be cut if possible. That disclosed the heavy leather high shoes, at sight of which she looked positively ill, and hastily dropped the skirt. She opened the pail, took out the lunch, wrapped it in the napkin, and placed it in a small pasteboard box. Locking the case again, she hid the key and hurried down the trail.

She followed it around the north end of the swamp and then struck into a footpath crossing a farm in the direction of the spires of the city to the northeast. Again she climbed a fence and was on the open road. For an instant she leaned against the fence, staring before her, then turned and looked back. Behind her lay the land on which she had been born to drudgery and a mother who made no pretence of loving her; before her lay the city through whose schools she hoped to find means of escape and the way to reach the things for which she cared. When she thought of how she looked she leaned more heavily against the fence and groaned; when she thought of turning back and wearing such clothing in ignorance all the days of her life, she set her teeth firmly and went hastily toward Onabasha.

On the bridge crossing a deep culvert at the suburbs she

glanced around, and then kneeling she thrust the lunch box between the foundation and the flooring. This left her empty-handed as she approached the big stone high school building. She entered bravely and inquired her way to the office of the superintendent. There she learned that she should have come the week before and arranged for her classes. There were many things incident to the opening of school, and one man unable to cope with all of them.

"Where have you been attending school?" he asked, as he advised the teacher of the cooking department not to telephone for groceries until she saw how many she would have in her classes; wrote an order for chemicals for the students of science; and advised the leader of the orchestra to try to get a professional to take the place of the bass violist, reported suddenly ill.

"I finished last spring at Brushwood school, district number nine," said Elnora. "I have been studying all summer. I am quite sure I can do the first year work, if I have a few days to get started."

"Of course, of course," assented the superintendent. "Almost invariably country pupils do good work. You may enter first year, and if you don't fit, we will find it out speedily. Your teachers will tell you the list of books you must have, and if you will come with me I will show you the way to the auditorium. It is now time for opening exercises. Take any seat you find vacant." He was gone.

Elnora stood before the entrance and stared into the

largest room she ever had seen. The floor sloped down to a yawning stage on which a band of musicians, grouped around a grand piano, were tuning their instruments. She had two fleeting impressions. That it was all a mistake; this was no school, but a grand display of enormous ribbon bows; and the second, that she was sinking, and had forgotten how to walk. Then a burst from the orchestra nerved her while a bevy of daintily clad, sweet-smelling things that might have been birds, or flowers, or possibly gaily dressed, happy young girls, pushed her forward. She found herself plodding across the back of the auditorium, praying for guidance, to an empty seat.

As the girls passed her, vacancies seemed to open to meet them. Their friends were moving over, beckoning and whispering invitations. Every one else was seated, but no one paid any attention to the white-faced girl stumbling half-blindly down the aisle next the farthest wall. So she went on to the very end facing the stage. No one moved, and she could not summon courage to crowd past others to several empty seats she saw. At the end of the aisle she paused in desperation, as she stared back at the whole forest of faces most of which were now turned upon her.

In one burning flash came the full realization of her scanty dress, her pitiful little hat and ribbon, her big, heavy shoes, her ignorance of where to go or what to do; and from a sickening wave that crept over her, she felt she was going to become very ill. Then out of the mass she saw a pair of big, brown boy eyes, three seats from

her, and there was a message in them. Without moving his body he reached forward and with a pencil touched the back of the seat before him. Instantly Elnora took another step which brought her to a row of vacant front seats.

She heard the giggle behind her; the knowledge that she wore the only hat in the room, burned her; every matter of moment, and some of none at all, cut and stung. She had no books. Where should she go when this was over? What would she give to be on the trail going home! She was shaking with a nervous chill when the music ceased, and the superintendent arose and, coming down to the front of the flower-decked platform, opened a Bible and began to read. Elnora did not know what he was reading, and she felt that she did not care. Wildly she was racking her brain to decide whether she should sit still when the rest left the room or follow, and ask some one where the Freshmen went first.

In the midst of the struggle one clean-cut sentence fell on her ear. "Hide me under the shadow of Thy wings."

Elnora began to pray frantically. "Hide me, O God, hide me, under the shadow of Thy wings."

Again and again she implored that prayer, and before she realized what was coming, every one had risen and the room was emptying rapidly. Elnora hurried after the nearest girl and in the press at the door touched her sleeve timidly.

"Will you please tell me where the Freshmen go?" she asked huskily.

The girl gave her one surprised glance, and drew away. "Same place as the fresh women," she answered, and those nearest her laughed.

Elnora stopped praying suddenly and the colour swept into her face. "I'll wager you are the first person I meet when I find it," she said and stopped short. "Not that! Oh, I must not do that!" she thought in dismay. "Make an enemy the first thing I do. Oh, not that!"

She followed with her eyes as the young people separated in the hall, some climbing stairs, some disappearing down side halls, some entering doors nearby. She saw the girl overtake the brown-eyed boy and speak to him, and he glanced back at Elnora and now there was a scowl on his face. Then she stood alone in the hall.

Presently a door opened and a young woman came out and entered another room. Elnora waited until she returned, and hurried to her. "Would you tell me where the Freshmen are?" she panted.

"Straight down the hall, three doors to your left," was the answer, as the girl passed.

"One minute please, oh, please," begged Elnora. "Do I knock or just open the door?"

"Go in and take a seat," replied the teacher.

"What if there aren't any seats?" gasped Elnora.

"Classrooms are never half-filled, there will be plenty," was the answer.

Elnora removed her hat. There was no place to put it, so she carried it in her hand. She appeared much better without it. After several efforts she at last opened

the door and stepping inside faced a smaller and more concentrated battery of eyes.

"The superintendent sent me. He thinks I belong here," she said to the professor in charge of the class, but she never before heard the voice with which she spoke. As she stood waiting, the girl of the hall passed on her way to the blackboard, and suppressed laughter told Elnora that her thrust had been repeated.

"Be seated," said the professor, and then because he saw Elnora was desperately embarrassed he proceeded to loan her a book and to ask her if she had studied algebra. She said she had a little, but not the same book they were using. He asked her if she felt that she could do the work they were beginning, and she said she did.

That was how it happened, that three minutes after entering the room she was compelled to take her place beside the girl who had gone last to the board, and whose flushed face and angry eyes avoided meeting Elnora's. Being compelled to concentrate on her proposition she forgot herself. When the professor asked that all pupils sign their work she firmly wrote "Elnora Comstock" under her demonstration. Then she took her seat and waited with white lips and trembling limbs, as one after another the professor called the names on the board, while their owners arose and explained their propositions, or flunked if they had not found a correct solution. She was so eager to catch their forms of expression and prepare herself for her recitation, that she never took her eyes from the work on the board, until clearly