

# FRECKLES

"Why do you call the baby vulture 'Little Chicken'?" she asked.

"'Twas Duncan began it," said Freckles. "You see, through the fierce cold of winter the birds of the swamp were almost starving. It is mighty lonely here, and they were all the company I was having. I got to carrying scraps and grain down to them. Duncan was that generous he was giving me of his wheat and corn from his chickens' feed, and he called the birds swamp chickens. Then when these big black fellows came, Mr. McLean said they were our nearest kind to come in the old world that they called 'Pharaoh's Chickens,' and he called mine 'Freckles' Chickens."

"Good enough!" cried the Bird Woman. "You must shoot something for them occasionally, and I'll bring more food when I come. If you will help me keep them until I get my series, I'll give you a copy of each study I make, mounted in a book."

"I'll be doing me very best," promised the boy, and from the depths he meant it.

"I wonder if that other egg is going to hatch?" mused the Bird Woman. "I am afraid not. It should have been out today. Isn't it a beauty? I never saw either an egg or the young before. They are rare this far north."

"So Mr. McLean said," answered Freckles.

The Bird Woman gave him her hand at parting, and Freckles joyfully realized that here was going to be another person for him to love. Freckles couldn't remember, after they had driven away, that they had even noticed his missing hand, and for the first time in his life he had forgotten it.

When the Bird Woman and the angel were well on the home road the angel told of the little corner of paradise into which she had strayed and of her new name.

"Did you know Mr. McLean had a son?" asked the angel. "Isn't the little accent he has and the way he twists a sentence too dear? And isn't it too old fashioned and funny to hear him call his father mister?"

"It sounds too good to be true," said the Bird Woman, answering the last question first. "I am so tired with these present day young men that patronizingly call their fathers 'dad,' 'governor,' 'old man' and 'old chap' that the boy's attitude of respect and deference struck me as being as fine as silk. There must be something rare about that young man."

But she did not find it necessary to tell the angel that for several years she had known the man who so proudly proclaimed himself Freckles' father to be a bachelor and a Scotchman. The Bird Woman had a fine way of attending strictly to her own business.

Freckles turned back to the trail, but stopped at every wild briar and looked at the pink satin of the petals. She was not of his world, and better than any other he knew it; but she might be his angel, and he was dreaming of naught but blind, silent worship. He finished the happiest day of his life, and that night he went back to the swamp as if drawn by a magnet. That Wessner would try for his revenge he knew. That he would be abetted by Black Jack was almost certain, but fear had fed the happy heart of Freckles. He had kept his trust. He had won the respect of the boss. Nobody could ever wipe from his heart the flood of holy adoration that had welled up with the coming of his angel.

At the edge of the clearing he came out into the bright moonlight, and there sat McLean on his mare. Freckles hurried up to him.

"Is there trouble?" he asked anxiously.

"That's what I wanted to ask you," said the boss. "I stopped at the cabin to see you a minute before I turned in, and they said you had come down here. You must not do it, Freckles."

Freckles stood combing his fingers through Nellie's mane, and the dainty creature was twisting her head around to his caresses. He pushed back his hat and looked up into McLean's face. "It's come to the 'sleep with one eye open,' sir. I'm not looking for anything to be happening for a week or two, but it's bound to come, and soon. If I'm to keep me trust as I've promised you and myself, I've to live here mostly until the gang comes. You must be knowing that, sir."

"I'm afraid it's true, Freckles," said McLean. "And I've decided to double the guard until we get here. It will only be a few weeks now, and I'm so anxious for you that you must not be left alone further. If anything should happen to you, Freckles, it would spoil one of the very dearest plans of my life."

Freckles heard with dismay the proposition to place a second guard.

"Oh no, no, Mr. McLean," he cried. "Not for the world! I wouldn't be having a stranger around, scaring me birds and tramping up me study and disturbing all me ways for any money! I am all the guard you need! I will be faithful! I will turn over the lease with no tree missing—on me life, I will! Oh, don't be sending another man to set them saying I turned coward and asked for help. It will just kill the honor of me heart if you do it. The only thing I want is another gun."

McLean handed a shining big revolver down to Freckles, who slipped it beside the one already in his belt.

"Freckles," he said at last, "we never know the timber of a man's soul until something cuts into him deeply and brings the grain out strong. You've the making of a mighty fine piece of furniture, my boy, and you shall have your own way these few weeks yet. Then if you will go I am going to take you to the city and educate you, and

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The angel eyed him sharply. "Well, maybe you are going to be a great scholar," she said, "but you don't look it. Your face isn't right for that, but it's got something big in it—something just great. I must find out what it is and then you must go to work on it. Your father is expecting you to do something. You can tell by the way he talks. You ought to begin right away. You've wasted too much time already."

Poor Freckles hung his head. He had never wasted an hour in his life. There had never been one that was his to waste.

The angel, studying him intently, read his thought in his face. "Oh, I don't mean that!" she cried, with the frank dismay of sixteen. "Of course you're not lazy! Nobody would ever think that from your looks. It's this I mean: There is something fine, strong and full of power in your face. There is something you are to do in this world, and no matter how hard you work at all these other things nor how successfully you do them it is all wasted until you find the one thing that you can do best. If you could go anywhere you please and do anything you want, what would you do?"

"I'd go to Chicago and sing in the First Episcopal choir," answered Freckles promptly.

The angel dropped back on a seat; the hat she had taken off and held in her fingers rolled to her feet. "These," she exclaimed vehemently, "you can see what I'm going to be. Nothing, absolutely nothing! You can sing! Of course you can sing! It is written all over you."

"Anybody with half wit could have seen he could sing without having to be told," she thought. "It is in the slenderness of his fingers and his quick, nervous touch. It is in the brightness of his hair, the fire of his eyes, the breadth of his chest, the muscles of his throat and neck and, above all, it's in every tone of his voice."

"Will you do something for me?" she asked.

"I'll do anything in the world you want me to," said Freckles largely, "and if I can't do what you want I'll go to work at once and I'll try till I can."

"Good," said the angel. "Go over there and stand before that bank and sing something—anything you think of first."

It was a children's song that he had led for the little folks at the home many times.

To fairly land we go,  
With a song of joy, heigh-ho!  
In dreams we'll stand upon that shore  
And all the realm behold.  
We'll see the sights so grand  
That belong to fairy land.  
Its mysteries we will explore,  
Its beauties will unfold.  
Oh, tra, la, la, oh, ha, ha, ha! We're happy now as we can be.  
Our welcome song we will prolong  
And greet you with our melody.  
O fairy land, sweet fairy land, we love to sing—

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held mice, moles and young rabbits of their chosen location. He saw them crossing the trail every day as the heat grew intense. The rattlers were sadly forgetting their manners, for they struck on no provocation whatever and didn't even remember to rattle afterward. Daily Freckles was compelled to drive big black-snakes and blue racers from the nests of his chickens. Often the terrified squalls of the parent birds would reach him far down the line, and he would run to the rescue of the babies.

He saw the angel when the carriage turned from the corduroy into the clearing. They stopped at the west entrance to the swamp, waiting for him to precede them down the trail, as he had told them it was safest for the horse that he should do so. They followed the east line to a point opposite the big chickens' tree, and Freckles carried in the cameras and showed the Bird Woman a path he had cleared to the log.

They arranged that Freckles should drive the carriage into the east entrance in the shade and then take the horse around toward the north to a better place he knew. Then he was to entertain the angel at his study or on the line until the Bird Woman finished her work and came to them.

Freckles trotted on air, for his dream had come true so soon. He was going down the timberline and the angel was following him. He asked to be excused for going first, because he wanted to be sure the trail was safe for her. She laughed at his fears, telling him she would follow.

"Thank you for each separate good thing that has come to me," he said, "and, above all, for the falling of the feather, for if it didn't really fall from an angel its falling brought an angel, and if it's in the great heart of you to exercise yourself any further about me, oh, do yourself to be taking good care of her!"

### CHAPTER IX. A NIGHT WITH BULLETS.

WHEN Freckles crossed Sleepy Snake creek and the goldfinch, waiting as ever, challenged, "See me?" he saw the dainty, swaying grace of the angel instead. What is a man to do with an angel who dismembers herself and scatters over a whole swamp, thrusting a vivid reminder upon him at every turn?

"You needn't be thinking," he said to the goldfinch, "that because I'm coming down this line alone day after day it's always to be so. Some of these days you'll be swinging on this wire, and you'll see me coming, and you'll swing, skip and flirt yourself around and chip up right spunky. 'See me?' I'll be saying 'See you? See her?' You'll look, and there she'll stand. The sunshine won't look gold any more, nor the roses pink, nor the sky blue, because she'll be the pinkest, bluest thing of all. You'll be yelling yourself hoarse with the jealousy of her. The saw bird will stretch his neck out of joint, and see in turn the heads of all the flowers. Wherever she goes I can go back afterward and see the things she's seen, walk the path she's walked, hear the grasses whispering over all the things she's said, and if there's a place too swampy for her bits of feet, maybe—maybe she'd be putting the beautiful arms of her about me neck and letting me carry her over!"

Freckles shivered as with a chill. He sent the cudgel whirling skyward, dextrously caught it and set it spinning.

"Maybe she'll be wanting the cup me blue and brown chickens raised their babies in. If there's any feathers falling that day, why, it's from the wings of me chickens—it's sure to be, for the only angel outside the gates will be walking this timberline, and every step of the way I'll be holding me breath and praying that she don't unfold wings and sail off before the hungry eyes of me."

When the week was up Freckles had his room crisp and glowing with fresh living things that rivaled every tint of the rainbow. He carried bark and filled up all the muckiest places of the trail.

It was middle July. The heat of the last few days had dried up the water about and through the Limberlost, so that it was possible to cross it on foot in almost any direction if one had any idea of direction and did not become completely lost in its rank tangle of vegetation and bushes.

The heat was doing one other thing that was bound to make Freckles, as a good Irishman, shiver. As the swale dried its inhabitants were seeking the cooler depths of the swamp. They liked neither the heat nor leaving the



"THEN GO FLYING," SAID THE BIRD WOMAN.

that it was the polite thing for him to do anyway.

"Oh," said Freckles, "so you was after knowing that? Well, I didn't s'pose you did, and I was afraid you'd think me wanting in respect to be preceding you!"

The astonished angel looked at him, caught the irrepressible gleam of Irish fun in his eyes, and they laughed together.

Freckles did not realize how he was talking that morning. He showed her many of the beautiful nests and eggs of the line. She could identify a number of them, but of some she was ignorant, so they made notes of the number and color of the eggs, material and construction of nest, color, size and shape of the birds and went on to look them up in the book.

At his room, when Freckles had lifted the overhanging bushes and stepped back for her to enter, his heart was all out of time and place. The angel drew a deep breath and stood staring, first at one side, then at another, then far off down the cathedral aisle. "It's just fairyland!" she cried ecstatically. Then she turned and stared at Freckles exactly as she had at his handiwork.

"What are you planning to be?" she asked slowly.

"Whatever Mr. McLean wants me to," he replied.

"What do you do most?" she asked.

"Watch me line."

"I don't mean work!"

"Oh! In me spare time I keep me room and study in me books."

"Do you work on the room or the books most?"

"On the room just what it takes to keep it up and the rest of the time on me books."

tree in a few minutes and with little noise?"

"Yes."

"Then go flying," said the Bird Woman. "Give the angel a lift up behind me, and we will ride the horse back to where you left him and wait for you. I finished Little Chicken in no time and sent him back. His mother came so close, I felt sure she would enter the log. The light was fine, so set and focused the camera and covered it with branches, attached the long hose and went away off over 100 feet and hid in some bushes to wait. A short, thick man and a tall, dark one passed me so closely I could almost have reached out and touched them. They carried a big dog on their shoulders. They said they could wait until about noon, and then they must lay off until you passed and then try to load and get out at night. They went on—not entirely out of sight—and began cutting a tree. Mr. McLean told me the other day what was likely to happen there, and if they get that tree down he loses his wager on you. Keep to the east and north and hustle. We'll meet you at the carriage. I am always armed. We will separate and creep up on them from different sides and give them a fusillade that will send them flying. You hurry now!"

She gathered up the reins and started briskly down the trail. The angel, hatless and with sparkling eyes, was clinging about her waist.

Freckles worked his way with great care, dodging limbs and bushes with noiseless tread and cutting as close to where he thought the men were as he felt that he dared if he were to remain unseen. As he ran he tried to think. It was Wessner, burning for his revenge, aided by the bully of the locality, that he was going to meet.

He must follow the Bird Woman's plan and meet them at the carriage, but if they really did mean to try to help him he must not allow it. Let the angel try to handle a revolver in his defense? Never! Not for all the trees in the Limberlost! She might shoot herself. She might forget to watch sharply and run across a snake that was not particularly well behaved that morning. Freckles permitted himself a grim smile as he went speeding on.

When he reached the carriage the Bird Woman and the angel had the horse hitched to it, the outfit packed and were calmly waiting.

"Give babe one of your revolvers, quick!" said the Bird Woman. "We will all creep up until we are in fair range. The underbrush is so thick and they are so hard at work that they

will never notice us, if we don't make a noise. You will fire first, then I will pop in from my direction, and then you, baby, and shoot quite high, or else very low. We mustn't really hit them."

Freckles protested.

The Bird Woman chose the middle distance, and for a last time cautioned the angel to lie down and shoot high, as she moved away.

Freckles' revolver spat fire. Lead spanged on steel. The saw handle flew from Wessner's hand and he reeled with the jar of the shock. Black Jack straightened, uttering a fearful oath. His hat was taken off by a shot from the northeast. The angel had not waited for the Bird Woman, and her shot could scarcely have been called high. At almost the same instant the third shot whistled in from the east. Black Jack spang into the air with a yell of complete panic, for it ripped a heel from his boot.

Freckles emptied his second chamber and the dirt spattered over Wessner. Shots poured in thick and fast. Without even reaching for a weapon, both men broke for the east road in great leaping bounds, while leaden slugs sung and hissed about them in deadly earnest.

Freckles was trimming his corners as closely as he dared, but if the angel did not really intend to hit, she was shaving the limit in a scandalous manner.

(To be continued.)

## VERULAM RURAL MAIL DELIVERY

The rural mail delivery which is being inaugurated will soon be going. The first route to be mapped out, starts from Bobcaygeon on delivery of noon mail, thence to Verulam and Somerville boundary via the Devitt settlement, then west along the town line to the 5th and 6th concession line of Verulam, then back to Bobcaygeon by way of Fairbairn. Mr. Adam S. Brock will start on his round Oct. 8th and will run three trips a week. There will be nearly 90 deliveries, and 30 boxes are ready for the setting up. As the carrier cannot start till delivery of the noon mail, it may mean that a considerable portion of the trips will likely be travelled in the evening. The Fairbairn post office will close on Oct. 6th. — Independent.



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