



FRECKLES

By
Gene Stratton-Porter

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MR. DUNCAN
FAV.

Several bees struck her and were angrily buzzing about before she noticed them. Then the humming swelled to a roar on all sides. A great, convulsive sob shook her, and she ran into the bushes, now into the swale, anywhere to avoid the swarming bees, ducking, dodging, fighting for her very life. Presently the humming seemed to grow a little fainter. She found the trail again and ran with all her might from a few of her angry pursuers.

And as she ran, straining every muscle, she suddenly became aware that crossing the trail before her was a great, round, black body with brown markings on its back, like painted geometrical patterns. She tried to stop, but the louder buzzing behind warned her she dared not. Gathering her skirts still higher, with hair flying about her face and her eyes almost bursting from their sockets, she ran straight toward it. The sound of her feet and the humming of the bees alarmed the rattler, and it stopped squarely across the trail, lifting its head above the grasses of the swale and rattling inquiringly—rattled until the bees were outdone.

Straight at it went the panic-stricken woman, running wildly and uncontrollably. She took one great leap, clearing its body on the path, and then flew on with winged feet. The snake, coiling to strike, missed Mrs. Duncan and landed among the bees instead. They settled over and about it, and, realizing that it had found trouble, it sank



STRAIGHT AT IT WENT THE PANIC STRICKEN WOMAN.

among the grasses and went thrashing toward the deep willow fringed low ground where its den was until the swale looked as if a mighty reaper were cutting a wide swath. The mass of enraged bees darted angrily about, searching for it, and, colliding with the scrub thorn, began a temporary settling there to discover whether it was a suitable place. Mrs. Duncan staggered on a few steps farther, fell face down on the path, where Freckles found her, and lay still.

Freckles worked with her until she drew a long, quivering breath and opened her eyes.

When she saw him bending over her she closed them tightly and, gripping him, struggled to her feet. He helped her up, and, with his arm about and half carrying her, they made their way to the clearing. Then, brawny Scotsman though she was, she keeled over again. The children added their wailing to Freckles' panic.

This time he was so near the cabin that he could carry her into the house and lay her on the bed. He sent the oldest boy scudding down the corduroy for the nearest neighbor, and between them they undressed her and discovered that she was not bitten. They bathed and bound up the bleeding wrist and coaxed her back to consciousness. She lay sobbing and shuddering. The first intelligent word she said was, "Freckles, look at that jar on the kitchen table and see if my yeast is no running over."

Several days went by before she could give Duncan and Freckles any detailed account of what had happened to her. She could not rest until she sent for McLean and begged him to save Freckles from further risk about that place of horrors. The boss went down to the swamp with his mind fully made up to do so.

Freckles laughed. "Why, Mr. McLean, don't you let a woman's nervous system set you worrying over me," he said. "I'm not denying how she felt, because I've been through it myself, but that's all over and gone. It's the height of me glory to fight it out with

the old swamp and all that's in it or will be coming to it and then to turn it over to you, as I promised you and myself I'd do, sir. You couldn't break the heart of me entire quicker than to be taking it from me now when I'm just on the home stretch. You mustn't let a woman get mixed up with business, for I've always heard about how it's bringing trouble."

The Bird Woman and the angel arrived on time for the third of the series and found McLean on the line talking to Freckles. The boss was filled with enthusiasm over a marsh article of the Bird Woman's that he had just read. He begged to be allowed to accompany her into the swamp and watch the method by which she secured an illustration in such a location.

The Bird Woman explained to him that it was an easy matter with the subject she then had in hand, and as Little Chicken was too small to be frightened by him and large enough to be getting troublesome, she was glad of his company. They went to the chicken log together, leaving to the happy Freckles the care of the angel, who had brought her banjo and a roll of songs. The Bird Woman told them that they might go to Freckles' room and practice until she finished with Little Chicken, and then she and McLean would come to the concert.

It was almost three hours before they finished and came down the west trail. As they reached the bushes at the entrance the voice of the angel stopped them, for it was commanding and filled with much impatience.

"Freckles James Ross McLean," she was saying, "you fill me with dark blue despair! You're singing as if your voice was glass and liable to break at any minute. Why don't you sing as you did a week ago? You are a fraud! You led me to think that there was the making of a great singer in you, and now you are singing—do you know how badly you are singing?"

"Yes," said Freckles meekly. "I'm thinking I'm too happy to be singing well today. The music don't come right only when I'm lonesome and sad. The world's for being all sunshine at present, for among you and Mr. McLean and the Bird Woman I'm after being that happy that I can't keep me thoughts on me notes. It's more than sorry I am to be disappointing you. Play it over, and I'll be beginning again, and this time I'll hold hard."

"Well," said the angel, "it seems to me that if I had all the things to be proud of that you have I'd lift up my head and sing!"

"And what is it I've to be proud of, ma'am?" politely inquired Freckles. "Why, a whole worldful of things," cried the angel explosively. "For one thing, you can be good and proud over the way you've kept the timber thieves out of this lease and the trust your father has in you. You can be proud over the way every one speaks of you. I heard a man say a few days ago that the Lumberlost was full of disagreeable things—poisonous dangers, unhealthy as it could be, and that since the memory of the first settlers it has been a rendezvous for runaways, thieves and murderers. This swamp is named for a man that got here and wandered around 'till he starved. That man I was talking with said he wouldn't take your job for \$1,000 a month—in fact, he said he wouldn't have it for any money, and you've never missed a day or lost a tree. Proud! Why, I should think you would just parade around about proper over that!"

"And you can always be proud that you are born an Irishman. My father is Irish, and if you want to see him just get up and strut give him a teeny opening to enlarge on his race. He says that if the Irish had decent territory they'd lead the world. He says they've always been handicapped by lack of space and of fertile soil. He says if Ireland had been as big and fertile as Indiana, why, England wouldn't ever have had the upper hand. She'd just be a little appendage. Fancy England an appendage! He says Ireland has the finest orators and the keenest statesmen in Europe today, and when England wants to fight with whom does she fill her trenches? Irishmen, of course! Ireland has the greenest grass and trees, the finest stones and lakes, and they're jaunting cars. I don't know just exactly what they are, but Ireland has all there are anyway. They're a lot of great actors and a few singers, and there never was a sweeter poet than one of theirs. You should hear my father recite 'Dear Harp of My Country.' He does it this way."

The angel rose, made an elaborate old time bow and, holding up the banjo, recited in clipping feet and meter, with rhythmic swing and a touch of brogue:

"Dear harp of my country" (the angel ardently clasped the banjo, "In darkness I found thee" (she held it up to the light); "The cold chain of silence had hung o'er thee long" (she muted the strings with her rosy palm); "Then proudly, my own Irish harp, I unbound thee" (she threw up her head and swept a ringing harmony); "And gave all thy chords to light, freedom and song" (she crashed into the notes of the accompaniment she had been playing for Freckles).

"That's what you want to be thinking of!" she cried. "Not darkness and lonesomeness and sadness, but light, freedom and song! I can't begin to think off hand of all the big, splendid things an Irishman has to be proud of, but whatever they are they are all yours and you are a part of them. I just despise that 'saddest when I sing' business. You can sing! Now you go over there and do it! I'm going to come down the aisle playing that ac-



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companion, and when I stop in front of you you sing!"

The angel's face wore an unusual flush. Her eyes were flashing, and she was palpitating with earnestness.

She parted the bushes and disappeared. Freckles, straight as a young pine and with the tenseness of a war horse scenting battle, stood waiting. Presently, before he saw she was there, she was coming down the aisle toward him, playing compellingly, and rifts of light were touching her with golden glory. Freckles stood as if transfixed.

The blood roared in his veins. The cathedral was majestically beautiful, from arched dome of frescoed gold, green and blue in never ending shades and harmonies to the most visible she trod, richly inlaid in choicest colors and gigantic pillars that were God's handiwork fashioned and perfected down through ages of sunshine and rain. But the fair young face and divinely molded form of the angel were his most perfect work of all. Never had she looked so surpassingly beautiful.

She was smiling encouragingly now, and as she came toward him she struck the chords full and strong.

The heart of poor Freckles almost burst with dull pain and his great love for her. In his desire to fulfill her expectations he forgot everything else, and when she reached his initial chord he was ready. He literally burst forth:

"Three little leaves of Irish green Gilted on one stem. Love, truth and valor do they mean. They form a magic gem."

The angel's eyes widened curiously, and her lips fell apart. A heavier color swept into her cheeks. She had intended to arouse him. She had succeeded with a vengeance. She was too young to know that in the effort to rouse a man women frequently kindle fires that they can neither quench

nor control. Freckles was looking out over her head now and slung that song as it had never been sung before for her alone, and instead of her helping him, as she had intended, he was carrying her with him on the waves of his voice away, away into a world she knew not of. When he struck into the chorus, wide eyed and panting, she was swaying toward him and playing for dear life to keep up.

"Oh, do you love? Oh, say you love. You love the shamrock green!"

At the last note Freckles' voice died away and his eyes fastened on the angel's. He had given his best and all his. He fell on his knees and folded his arms across his breast. The angel, as if magnetized, walked straight down the aisle to him and, running her fingers into the crisp masses of his red hair, tilted his head back and laid her lips on his forehead.

Then she stepped back and faced him. "Good boy!" she said in a voice that wavered from the throbbing of her shaken heart. "Dear boy! I knew you could do it! I knew it was in you! Freckles, when you go out into the world, if you can face a great audience and sing like that, just once, you will be immortal, and anything you want will be yours."

"Anything?" gasped Freckles.

"Anything," said the angel.

Freckles found his feet, muttered something and, catching up his old bucket, plunged into the swamp blindly on a pretense of getting water. The angel walked slowly across the study and sat down on the rustic bench and through narrowed lids intently studied the tip of her shoe.

(To Be Continued.)

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Miss Fitch Re-elected.

Miss Lillian Fitch, well known to many Plattsmouth people, was yesterday re-elected leader of the department of oratory of the Omaha Woman's club. Miss Fitch's ability as an instructor of dramatic reading is well known here, she having conducted a class here for some time.

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