

A woman in a long, flowing red cloak is seen from behind, walking through a dense forest. She is carrying a woven basket in her right hand. The forest is filled with tall, thin trees and a lush green undergrowth. The lighting is soft, suggesting a misty or overcast day.

A GIRL of the LIMBERLOST

by Gene Stratton-Porter



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A GIRL *of the* LIMBERLOST



Spurned by her grieving mother since birth, 16-year-old Elnora Comstock finds solace in nature, cultivating a collection of rare moths and other specimens from Indiana's Limberlost swampland.

Elnora desires above all the love of her unaffectionate mother and an education at the local high school. But without any financial support available, Elnora must rely on her resourcefulness and determination to pay her way through school.

This coming-of-age classic combines fascinating observations on nature with the struggles of growing up at the dawn of the 20th century. Will Elnora be able to earn enough money for her education? Will her mother ever truly love her and recognize that "the only pleasure in this world worth having is the joy we derive from living for those we love"?

✦ ✦ CLEAN LANGUAGE VERSION



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Contents

Chapter I.....	1
Chapter II.....	17
Chapter III.....	26
Chapter IV.....	36
Chapter V.....	56
Chapter VI.....	68
Chapter VII.....	84
Chapter VIII.....	107
Chapter IX.....	113
Chapter X.....	125
Chapter XI.....	141
Chapter XII.....	155
Chapter XIII.....	176
Chapter XIV.....	189
Chapter XV.....	200
Chapter XVI.....	212
Chapter XVII.....	222
Chapter XVIII.....	234
Chapter XIX.....	243
Chapter XX.....	254
Chapter XXI.....	262
Chapter XXII.....	275
Chapter XXIII.....	290
Chapter XXIV.....	301
Chapter XXV.....	312

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 while 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 fixed 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 be off, 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, which 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, and pinned on the skimpy black hat. She opened the back door.

“You’ve gone so plumb daffy you are forgetting your dinner,” her mother cajoled.

“I don’t want anything to eat,” replied Elnora.

“You’ll take your dinner or you’ll not go one step. Are you crazy? Walk almost 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! And after I’ve gone and bought you this nice new pail and filled it especial to start on!”

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 follow the long walk to the gate and go from 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!" commented Mrs. Comstock.

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 came at last 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 debris in the end of a hollow log, she took a key that unlocked the padlock of a large, weather beaten old box, inside of which lay, among a variety of other things, several books, a butterfly apparatus, and a small cracked mirror. The walls of the box 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 of her dress. She gazed despairingly at the generous length of the narrow skirt and lifted it as high as she would have cut it if possible. That disclosed her heavy, leather shoes, the sight of which made her feel positively ill. She hastily dropped the skirt.

She opened the pail, removed the lunch, wrapped it in the napkin, and placed it in a small, pasteboard box withdrawn from the larger box. Leaving the pail within and locking the box again, she hid the key.

She hurried down the trail, following it around the north end of the swamp, and then entered a footpath crossing a farm and leading 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 pretense 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 appeared, 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 face 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 previous week and arranged about 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, while he advised the teacher of Domestic Science not to telephone for groceries until she knew 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 hire 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 it is too difficult, 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.”

Elnora stood before the entrance and stared into the largest room she ever had seen. The floor sloped to a yawning stage on which a band of musicians, grouped around a grand piano, were tuning their instruments. She had two fleeting impressions: it was all a mistake. This was no school, but a grand display of enormous

ribbon bows. 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. Everyone 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, while she stared back at the whole forest of faces most of which were now turned upon her.

In a flash came the full realization of her awkward 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 which 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 laughter 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. Coming down to the front of the flower-decked platform, he 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 others left the room or follow, and ask someone where the freshmen went first.