A Girl of the Limberlost (Library of Indiana Classics) by Stratton-Porter

A Charming Old Fashioned Book.

Of all the books written by Hoosier writers, Gene Stratton-Porters A Girl of the Limberlost is unquestionably the most cherished: the timeless story of an impoverished young girl, Elnora Comstock, growing up on the edge of the Limberlost swamp. Elnora Comstock has served as a role model for successive generations of independent young readers.

Think of it as a Midwestern Cinderella story, but with no glass slipper and plenty of moths. Gene Stratton Porter was at the peak of her skills when she wrote A Girl of the Limberlost, which starts off as a young girls struggle against her mothers virulent hatred -- and soon evolves into an enchanting little romance.

Elnora Comstock has barely signed up for college when she discovers that she cant afford it -- tuition and textbooks cost too much, and her shabby clothes are mocked by her classmates. Even worse, her half-crazy, malicious mother refuses to cough up any money.

But she soon finds that she can pay another way -- a strange lady called the Bird Woman is willing to pay money for moths, butterflies, caterpillars and chrysalids, which Elnora can easily find in a vast dangerous swamp called the Limberlost. And her friends Margaret and Wesley are happy to help her in any way they can -- clothes, a violin -- until the day when Mrs. Comstock comes to a shocking realization about her daughter.

Then Elnora encounters a wealthy young man named Philip Ammon, who has the same love of nature that she has -- as well as a wealthy socialite fiancee named Edith. But when a party in honor of Edith and Philips engagement is wrecked by a butterfly and a fit of jealousy, he begins to realize what his true feelings for Elnora are...
A Girl of the Limberlost can be divided into two sections -- the first is a Cinderellaesque story about a strong, intelligent young girl who is pursuing her music and education, despite her nasty old mother's loathing of her. But once that storyline is wrapped up, the second half of the book becomes a haunting, passionate love story.

Stratton-Porter was at her peak when she wrote this -- her prose is overflowing with natural beauty (the whole earth was purple with a thick blanket of violets) and some very tough personal situations, such as when Margaret and Wesley take in a badly-abused young boy. And both halves of A Girl of the Limberlost reach an emotionally harrowing climax as two of the characters are forced to see the raw ugliness of their actions.

But the romance is also really adorable, especially since it's based on friendship and both parties only realize it belatedly. And Stratton-Porter adds in a touch of romance for other characters, including old married couples and snotty socialites.

Elnora is a likable, realistic girl that you'd like as a friend -- kind, charitable and hardworking, but has flashes of temper. And Philip Ammon is a rather sweet if clueless guy. Mrs. Comstock starts out as a crazy old lady who wallows in her grief and obsession with her dead husband, but Stratton-Porter rebuilds her into a character you can like and respect; Edith also starts off as a nasty snotty rich girl who cares more about social status than love, but the author puts her through the grinder and makes her more likable.

A Girl of the Limberlost is both a brilliant coming-of-age tale and a lush little romance, set against an epic backdrop of natural beauty. Definitely a must-read.

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