

A GIRL OF THE LIMBERLOST

A full-length drama by
Marie Kohler

Freely adapted from the novel by
Gene Stratton-Porter

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

ELNORA COMSTOCK, a country girl about to enter high school.

KATE COMSTOCK, her mother, a widowed farm woman.

WESLEY SINTON, a neighboring farmer, middle-aged.

MAGGIE SINTON, Wesley's wife.

VOICE OF PRINCIPAL. May be voiced by the actor who plays Wesley.

VOICE OF TEACHER. May be voiced by the actor who plays Bird Woman.

PALE MAN, the spirit of Elnora's deceased father. May be played by the actor who plays Wesley, and by the actor who plays Bird Woman in Part II, Scene 6.

BIRD WOMAN, a naturalist, late middle-aged.

BILLY, a homeless boy, around 10 years old.

CONTEMPORARY GIRL, a high school-aged girl.

BOY, a student, around 10 years old. May be played by the actor who plays Billy.

STUDENT #1, a high school-aged girl or boy. May be played by the actor who plays Robin.

STUDENT #2, a high school-aged girl. May be played by the actor who plays Contemporary Girl.

ROBIN, a high school-aged girl or boy.

ENSEMBLE, high school-aged students.

Additional student roles and diverse casting welcome.

TIME

Around 1909.

SETTING

Much of the play's action moves between the Comstock cabin and the Sinton household—both rustic farmhouses, the first less homey than the second. Both may be minimally or more realistically represented, and both exist within the larger environment of the Limberlost Swamp. The Limberlost, once a wild, natural area in Indiana consisting of meadows, swampland and forest (home to many plants, birds and insects), may be evoked through sound, lights and the Ensemble.

NOTE ON ENSEMBLE

The Ensemble creates scenes and tableaux that help evoke settings and offer transition between time and place. Actors may be directed to create story theater as much or little as desired, using movement and actor-made sound (in addition to desired sound design) to create impressions of man-made or natural settings. The use of flashlights, a sheet for shadows, noisemakers, puppets, instruments, etc. are all possibilities. The Ensemble's lines may be divided up any way that best suits each production.

DIALECT

A country dialect (derived from the novel) is suggested but isn't necessary. Indiana place names may be eliminated or substituted with others, if localizing the production is desired.

DEDICATION

Dedicated to two dazzling women who got me going: My mother, Julilly House Kohler, and my mentor, Jane Barclay Mandel.

PROLOGUE

CONTEMPORARY GIRL: A long time ago—about a hundred years, in fact—before there were cell phones, drones, virtual reality or the internet, there was...the Limberlost. It was a swamp, but it was beautiful, and it went on for miles and miles.

(Forest noises.)

My great-grandmother read a book about it. She gave it to her daughter, and she gave it to her daughter, and her daughter gave it to...well, I'm pretty sure you get it. My mother gave it to me.

Today, we'll all tell you the story of the Limberlost.

(Other actors emerge, in contemporary clothes, perhaps.)

There was a mother and a daughter who lived there—and a little boy—not that different from you and me. They were poor. It wasn't easy. And there were others, too. An aunt and uncle—a teacher—friends. And other creatures of the Limberlost, like—

(All may create forest noises with noise-making instruments.)

STUDENT #1: Butterflies.

BOY: Moths and dragonflies.

STUDENT #1: Birds and fireflies.

BOY: This is a story of all of them—all the creatures living in the Limberlost.

CONTEMPORARY GIRL: And the music—

ALL: The music that they made.

(Actors branch out creating the sound environment and feel of the Limberlost. They may put on period costumes.)

PART I

SCENE 1

Comstock cabin in the Limberlost Swamp. Lights up on ELNORA, dressing for school in plain country clothes, and her mother, KATE, preparing her daughter's lunch. Elnora starts out of the house, hoping not to be noticed.

KATE: Elnora, wait. Comb your hair before you go. Bind it down good and modest.

(Kate hands Elnora something to tie back her hair. Elnora does.)

ELNORA: All right.

(WESLEY enters.)

Uncle Wesley!

KATE: Doesn't an old swamp farmer like you have work to do on a Monday morning?

ELNORA: *(To Wesley:)* Do you think I look all right?

WESLEY: Honey, there's nothing you could do to improve on that face of yours!

KATE: *(Dry:)* You're going to make the girl vain...

ELNORA: I mean my clothes—will they get by at a city high school?

WESLEY: One of the reasons I came by was to give you a once-over for Aunt Maggie, to see if you were dressed nice and proper.

KATE: And are you saying she might not be dressed proper?

WESLEY: Well, styles have changed since our day, Kate—in town, especially.

KATE: *(To Wesley:)* Isn't what's good enough here, good enough for town? Her clothes fit in just fine at our country school. So did she, for that matter.

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WESLEY: She certainly did. And your get-up is just fine, Elnora. You'll fit right in. You're right to let her go, Kate. She has what it takes to go to a good high school – and beyond –

KATE: Why does everybody need extra schooling these days?

WESLEY: Well, she can go far with some fine education.

KATE: But isn't working the land good enough? I never finished eighth grade – you didn't either, Wesley – most folks never do.

ELNORA: But I want to go to high school –

KATE: You're going, don't fret. I won't go back on my word.

WESLEY: (*To Kate:*) I know it's going to mean more work for you. Money too, most likely. But we can help out. You know how Maggie feels about Elnora – she loves her like her own.

KATE: But she's not. If Maggie had her own, she might understand what it's really like raisin' a child. Anyway, we're all right – don't need any help –

(Elnora tries to leave unnoticed.)

Elnora – you're forgetting your lunch pail.

ELNORA: Oh, I don't need anything to eat. I'll be fine.

KATE: You can't walk three miles, go to school all day and walk back with no food. Not my daughter. Here. I've scrubbed this and filled it up good and special for today.

(Elnora returns and picks up old, battered pail.)

ELNORA: All right – thank you – 'bye.

KATE & WESLEY: Goodbye.

(Elnora exits.)

WESLEY: That lunch pail, Kate. Heck of a way to start her off on her new adventure.

KATE: Perfectly good lunch pail. I'm not gonna coddle her, she chose this – who knows, she may have had enough of it by nightfall.

(ENSEMBLE evokes sound and feel of morning in the woods and swamp.)

SCENE 2

(Elnora's "secret place" in the Limberlost, where she's hidden a box in the ground. Making sure she's not watched, she kneels, removes camouflage and opens lid of box. She lifts out frames of mounted butterflies and moths; gazes at them.)

ELNORA: Now, in the name of all things good and beautiful, hide me under the shadow of thy wings. Hide me – protect me – under the shadow of thy wings.

(She replaces them, begins to leave, remembers the lunch pail, and stashes it and contents. She undoes ribbon, shakes out hair, beautiful and full.)

(Ensemble flows from Limberlost into "going-to-school" environment.)

SCENE 3

(Presented impressionistically, as if a bad dream.)

(School auditorium. Students swarm through audience and onto stage. Elnora enters, lost. Assembly has begun; she hears end of speech.)

VOICE OF PRINCIPAL: ...and on this day – September 7, 1909 – we mark the beginning of an exciting year. As principal of this high school, I hope for academic excellence and cooperation amongst all students. Thank you. You may now proceed to class.

(Elnora looks for her way, finds herself fighting the flow of other students.)

ELNORA: Can you tell me where the freshmen go?

STUDENT #1: Don't you know?

ELNORA: No, I don't.

STUDENT #1: Then why should I tell you?

ELNORA: Remind me not to help you with anything!

STUDENT #2: It's down the hall.

STUDENT #1: Why'd you let that country girl ahead of you? Who is she, anyway?

STUDENT #2: I don't know, never seen her before—

BOY: She's the new kid!

STUDENT #1: Look what's she dressed in! What's her name?

ELNORA: My name's Elnora Comstock.

BOY: Corn-stalk?

STUDENT #1: Corn-stalk!

ELNORA: Comstock! I'm Elnora Comstock!

STUDENT #1: Ha! That was a good one, right?

STUDENT #2: Just leave her alone...

(In the next impressionistic exchanges with Elnora turning from one confrontation to another, sound or music may be helpful reinforcement.)

VOICE OF TEACHER: That was a fine algebra demonstration, Miss Comstock. Now, what about your books?

ELNORA: My books?

VOICE OF TEACHER: When will you purchase them?

ELNORA: You mean I have to buy them?

STUDENT #2: We all have to buy them –

ELNORA: But I don't have the money –

VOICE OF TEACHER: If you can't pay today, could you pay tomorrow?

BOY: She's got no money!

(Elnora runs off.)

STUDENT #1: Did you see her boots? There's mud all over them.

STUDENT #2: Maybe she's a farm kid –

STUDENT #1: Her hair is like wild people used to wear – about a hundred years ago!

BOY: Where's she from?

STUDENT #2: I heard her say the Limberlost –

STUDENT #1: You mean the swamp? That Limberlost?

BOY: She lives in a swamp?

(Laughter, chatter as students exit.)

(Ensemble transitions to create environment of late afternoon in Limberlost.)

SCENE 4

(Elnora sits alone, despondent, at her spot in the Limberlost. Wesley enters.)

WESLEY: How'd it go, girl? *(Pause.)* Oh, dear, what's the matter? Bad as that?

ELNORA: Why didn't you stop me?

WESLEY: From what?

ELNORA: From acting like a fool.

WESLEY: We've been thinking of you all day.

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ELNORA: You should have seen me—I was a laughingstock.

WESLEY: Honey, were the clothes all right?

ELNORA: Awful! All their lives they'll remember the new girl with the ugly dress and work boots. I know I'll never forget it.

WESLEY: If all that matters is how we look to others, there's not much worth to anything...

ELNORA: But it's not just the clothes. We're too poor to buy what I need—

WESLEY: I don't know that you're so poor.

ELNORA: What do you mean? Of course we are!

WESLEY: Your mother owns three hundred acres of good land—with the finest timber on it that ever grew—oaks, maples, poplars. She could easily cut and sell some trees.

ELNORA: My mother wouldn't cut a tree to save her life! I wouldn't either!

WESLEY: Well, maybe someone else will have to cut one for you.

ELNORA: No! I don't want you to!

WESLEY: Calm down, calm down. Goodness, you're as tough as she is. Tell me what you need.

ELNORA: Money.

WESLEY: How much?

ELNORA: Over twenty dollars—but not from you!

WESLEY: Elnora—

ELNORA: Why'd I think textbooks were free? Why didn't I know that?

WESLEY: It's a public school! Aren't books free?

ELNORA: Not in city high schools. Why didn't Mother go with me—then we'd have found things out together. Any other mother would have. But when has mine done anything like other mothers?

WESLEY: Well, that's true enough.

ELNORA: Never. Why should she start now? (*Pause.*) Why is she like that, Uncle Wesley?

WESLEY: Elnora—

ELNORA: Why won't she help me?

WESLEY: I know it's hard for you. She loves you, she just doesn't show it easy. She's kind of tight inside. Tied up in knots, like. You just be patient and wait a mite longer. Meantime, you keep comin' to us—to Maggie and me—like you always have.

ELNORA: Tell me what it used to be like for us, Uncle Wesley.

WESLEY: When, Elnora?

ELNORA: Before my father died.

WESLEY: You love those stories, don't you? Well, now, your mother, she's always been proud—worked hard, stood straight and tall—always did the honorable thing. Still does, too. And with that father of yours she got softer—as gentle as could be. Heavens, how she loved that man. What a pretty sight you three were together—making a family, working the land. Warmed the heart to see. But then...

ELNORA: Then.

WESLEY: Well, after he died—a widow on her own, you know...and you, just four years old. (*Pause.*) Too deep for me to know that pain—from the outside, anyway. All we can do is respect her grief.

ELNORA: Our house is lonely—and so quiet. (*Pause.*) Maybe that's why I love the Limberlost.

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WESLEY: How's that?

ELNORA: It's so full of sounds.

WESLEY: Huh. You're a thinker. Maybe you should go home now – tell your ma about the money, ask her nice to help. If she won't, then you've got to swallow that pride and come get it from Maggie and me.

ELNORA: I can't take your money. You know Mother wouldn't – I wouldn't, either –

WESLEY: We'd make it a loan, Elnora – just for a little while 'til you can pay us back.

ELNORA: No.

WESLEY: Now look here, there's one thing you're forgetting.

ELNORA: What am I forgetting?

WESLEY: What you mean to Maggie and me. The only time I see light in Maggie's eyes is when she's with you – when she's done something for you. So you go easy about refusing her. You're the only child we've got, you know.

ELNORA: Maybe.

WESLEY: Don't cut us off from that!

ELNORA: Well, if I can't find money any other way, maybe I'd borrow it from you. I'd pay you back, though.

WESLEY: Fine.

ELNORA: Somehow. *(Pause.)* I've been sort of panic-struck all day and couldn't think. But now, maybe I can.

WESLEY: What do ya' know about that? Here's our Elnora back again – head high and bright as a penny! Now, let's go have our suppers –

(In another area, lights may reveal Kate, in her yard.)

ELNORA: Wait. There's something I have to...

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(Elnora opens her case hidden in the ground, pulls out lunch pail and tosses Kate's food away. She puts the ribbon back in her hair, binding it tightly.)

WESLEY: So you hid the dad-burned pail in there, huh?
(Amused:) Can't say I blame you.

ELNORA: Now I'm as hungry as the blazes!

WESLEY: Then get along home!

(Ensemble evokes early evening sounds.)

SCENE 5

(Kate is feeding chickens, outside her home.)

KATE: Did you bring home your lunch scraps—for the chickens?

ELNORA: There weren't any scraps left—I finished everything.

KATE: Liked it, did you? Thought you would.

ELNORA: And I'm as hungry tonight as I ever was.

KATE: Supper's ready. Let's go in. We'll do chores later.

(They enter the house. Elnora sits, Kate serves food.)

What kept you? I expected you an hour ago.

(Elnora doesn't respond.)

Looks like you've been crying.

ELNORA: I thought I'd look funny today. And sure enough, they laughed at me.

KATE: Laughed at you? Why?

ELNORA: How I was dressed. No one else wore an old-fashioned dress, not one. And no one else wore work boots.

KATE: What's wrong with work boots?

ELNORA: My hair wasn't right—my ribbon was narrow, theirs were wide. I didn't know where to go or what to do. I had no books. *(Pause.)* They called me Elnora Cornstalk.

KATE: Cornstalk? Ignorant foolishness, that's what that is.

ELNORA: It was awful!

KATE: What does it matter what people say or think? Nothing. You need to learn that in life.

ELNORA: I suppose. But I also need money—they said twenty dollars—to pay for books.

KATE: Twenty dollars? They might as well have said a hundred!

ELNORA: I know it's a lot, but I thought maybe we had something extra...

KATE: No, I can't raise a cent. I told you not to ask for money.

ELNORA: I know, but I never knew about the books.

KATE: No? I did.

ELNORA: What? You knew I had to pay for books?

KATE: That's the city for you. Thought everybody knew that.

ELNORA: I didn't!

KATE: Life is pay, pay, pay—anyone who isn't mooning over butterflies knows that. If you don't pay one way, you do another—

ELNORA: How could you send me off like—

KATE: I don't have one extra cent—where our land tax is going to come from this year, I do not know—

ELNORA: Never mind. I'll do it on my own, then.

KATE: You're going back?

ELNORA: Yes. Tomorrow—and the next day—and the next.

KATE: Well, you've got gumption. That's the stuff our family's made of.

ELNORA: Is it? (*Pause.*) I'll do the night chores. You don't have to bother coming out.

(Elnora exits.)

(Ensemble tableaux weave in and out through Scenes 6-8, evoking different environments, not specifically tied to time or place in a linear way.)

(Ensemble evokes evening Limberlost environment.)

SCENE 6

(Sinton household, evening. Maggie and Wesley clean up after dinner.)

MAGGIE: We can help her – we can spare some money.

WESLEY: I know, I told her. But she's as stiff-backed as her mother – she'll never take anybody's help.

MAGGIE: Kate needs her comeuppance. Really.

WESLEY: Give her some time, Maggie.

MAGGIE: Time? She's had thirteen years! There's a time for patience and there's a time to act! The poor child's had to suffer her mother's sadness long enough. We can't let it spoil her education.

WESLEY: Maybe so. I know the girl's got to have some money and some clothes – and needs 'em quick. (*Pause.*) How about you stitch her up a couple dresses?

MAGGIE: Oh what a good idea, Wesley! I'm not what you'd call an expert, but I know a few things. I can turn a waistband real good – make pleats and darts –

WESLEY: 'Course you can.

MAGGIE: (*Beginning to bustle:*) Tomorrow we can buy some fabric—crisp new gingham, maybe—not that old calico—so dreary! And some nice new lace-up shoes? All she's got is those old work boots.

WESLEY: There's one thing I'd like to get for Elnora.

MAGGIE: What's that?

WESLEY: Kate's given the girl a nasty, bunged-up old lunch pail. Elnora hid it in the ground—didn't eat a bite all day!! I'd like to get her a fine new lunchbox.

MAGGIE: And I'll fill it! I could fry up some chicken, make some sandwiches—

WESLEY: Good—

(Maggie puts her apron on.)

MAGGIE: Maybe bake her up some spice cake—that's her favorite—help me get things ready, Wesley—and how about some oatmeal cookies? Or I could make some custard, or some gingerbread, or...

(Lights dim as Maggie lists the food she will make.)

(Time passes. Ensemble transitions to school environment, flowing into halls.)

SCENE 7

ENSEMBLE: Our state entered the union in 1816, with the Northwest Territory.

In our state seal, we see the sun rising in the east—that's for our bright future.

We see the woodsman with his axe, breaking up the wilderness—

Progress! See? We are moving forward!

(Transition to outside Comstock cabin, dusk. There may be fireflies flickering. Elnora finishes her hoeing. A moth flits near her. Elnora sees it – new energy fills her. She raises her lantern.)

ELNORA: Are you out here tonight?

(She hangs lantern on hook, retrieves another lantern and hangs it on clothesline, a distance away.)

KATE: *(From inside the house:)* Are you finished with the chores, Elnora?

ELNORA: Yes, Mother.

(She stretches a sheet taut, waits for moths. Animation fills her.)

Come on, my little friend—you're late this season. Oh, how beautiful, your wings...

(She holds out an empty clothespin jar. The form of a boy is lurking in the shadows of the scene. Lights indicate moths fluttering toward light.)

What kind are you, all green and beautiful? I want to know your name. Oh, there you go, show off your color—

(Elnora follows the moth carefully. It alights.)

Let me help you slip in...

(She tops off jar with her hand.)

What a lovely creature you are. Let's go see your markings in the light.

(She goes inside. The little figure snoops around, peers into lighted window, snaking through various areas.)

(Ensemble creates tableau of school.)

SCENE 8

ENSEMBLE: Lumber!

Our state grows tons and tons of timber—
Pine, sycamore and oak—

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Two million trees are felled each year –
Fresh wood for houses, mills and cities –
All from our great forests, fields and swamps!

*(Next morning in the Limberlost. Elnora on her way to school,
taking in the beauty of nature around her.)*

(BIRD WOMAN enters, carrying photographic equipment.)

BIRD WOMAN: Something catch your eye?

ELNORA: Sorry?

BIRD WOMAN: *(Somewhat crotchety, in a benign way:)* Come help me with this apparatus. The old patellas don't cooperate as they once did.

ELNORA: The old what?

BIRD WOMAN: Patellas! The knees, my girl, the knees. You haven't seen any *Danaus plexippus* nearby, have you? They migrate at this time of year. When they're in a cluster, it's the most exquisite sight—all those black markings on orange wings.

ELNORA: You mean the monarchs?

BIRD WOMAN: *Danaus plexippus*, yes. I prefer the scientific name. The fields are often filled with hundreds of them about now.

ELNORA: Yes, I've seen them swarm like that in late summer – a little earlier than this, usually.

BIRD WOMAN: So you notice butterflies? A fellow enthusiast, perhaps? I don't run to catch them like I used to, but I take their pictures. Here, help me set this up so it's focused towards that tree.

ELNORA: You mean the poplar over there?

BIRD WOMAN: Indeed. A very likely resting spot, if they should come wandering near here.

ELNORA: I've noticed that.

(They adjust equipment.)

I have some examples of the... "Danaus plexippus," actually.

BIRD WOMAN: Have you? Unusual for a girl your age. Usually it's bows and ribbons, dresses for the dance... *(Pause.)* You collect, do you?

ELNORA: I don't know about "collect." When I can, I gather butterflies and moths.

BIRD WOMAN: So you "gather"?

ELNORA: I love everything outdoors – trees, insects – moths, especially. Moths die so soon after they're born, there seems no wickedness in gathering them.

BIRD WOMAN: I have thought the same. You remind me of someone I knew once. *(Pause.)* Well, no Danaus today, it seems. Do you know what varieties of moths you have?

ELNORA: Not the scientific names.

BIRD WOMAN: Perhaps you have the large gray ones – the Cecropia variety?

ELNORA: Cecropia?

BIRD WOMAN: They fly mostly on summer nights. Help carry this to my automobile, would you? *(Indicating offstage car.)*

ELNORA: You mean the ones with reddish markings?

BIRD WOMAN: That's right. You have them?

ELNORA: Yes. *(Starts to help pack up equipment.)* I also have the pale, blue-green ones –

BIRD WOMAN: Actias luna – known as the "luna," commonly.

ELNORA: Oh. And a lavender kind, with red on it.

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BIRD WOMAN: (*Alert:*) Bright red?

ELNORA: More a reddish brown—with yellow spots and gray lines on their wings.

BIRD WOMAN: How many of those do you have?

ELNORA: I had over 30 eggs—some didn't hatch, and some caterpillars died. But there must be about ten perfect ones.

BIRD WOMAN: Define yourself. In what way, "perfect"?

ELNORA: Well, the whole body—with wings and legs—and the... (*Doesn't know term, so mimes "antennae" with hands.*)

BIRD WOMAN: (*Filling in the word:*) Antennae. So you have ten complete specimens?

ELNORA: About ten, I think, yes.

BIRD WOMAN: Young woman, that's a rare find for this area. I know four museums that would want all of them. I'd pay you two dollars each.

ELNORA: Two dollars?

BIRD WOMAN: That's my limit.

ELNORA: You'd buy them?!

BIRD WOMAN: Most certainly I would. (*Pause.*) You don't have a Yellow Emperor, do you?

ELNORA: A Yellow Emperor?

BIRD WOMAN: "Eacles imperialis," I should say. The most spectacular of specimens—brownish markings on golden wings. They look like leaves—magnificent! Keep your eyes peeled for that one, my girl. It would bring a pretty penny. What is your name, by the way?

ELNORA: Elnora Comstock.

BIRD WOMAN: You live near here?

ELNORA: Yes, just through there. (*Indicating.*)

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BIRD WOMAN: In the Limberlost? You're a rare one, too, in that case. Not many souls left in this little wilderness. They've all moved to cities, for the factories and mills.

ELNORA: My father worked in a lumber mill.

BIRD WOMAN: Did he?

ELNORA: For a little while. Before that, he was a farmer.

BIRD WOMAN: A more wholesome occupation, in my opinion. People need to work, I understand, but why despoil the few spots we have remaining where we can refresh our spirits? And all in the name of progress? You know that quote—"In wildness is the..." Oh, what is it?

ELNORA: I don't think I—

BIRD WOMAN: Thoreau, my girl. America's great genius—you must read him—education's not complete until you do. He says, "In wildness..." Oh, for heaven's sake, what is it? "In wildness..." Ah! "In wildness is the preservation of the world!"

ELNORA: ...the preservation of the world.

BIRD WOMAN: That's it. I so enjoy it when I can remember. But see what our so-called "progress" has forgotten? This jewel of a paradise—with its ponds, woods and birdlife. I come here to refresh, invigorate, renew. And, of course, undertake my studies.

ELNORA: Your studies?

BIRD WOMAN: Entomology. Insects. The swamp of the Limberlost is one of the few places left where these beauties can be found. We humans are so impossibly shortsighted! Really, it makes me very cross. (*Pause.*) Have you any need for money? Most girls your age do—new clothes, ribbons, those sorts of things. You could make some significant money by helping me, my girl.

ELNORA: (*Self-conscious:*) I do have a need for money.

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BIRD WOMAN: Interested in doing business?

ELNORA: Yes!

BIRD WOMAN: Wonderful. Help me lug this to my automobile, will you—it's more than my patellas like to deal with.

(They finish packing up and start to carry equipment toward the car.)

Report to my house later today—near the post office at the edge of town—and bring what "gatherings" you can carry. Just load that up for me, would you please?

(Elnora carries things offstage to load them. Bird Woman remains onstage.)

ELNORA: *(Off:)* I'll be there, after school.

BIRD WOMAN: You're a student then? Good for you. So important. I will pay fair prices for all the moths and butterflies you find.

ELNORA: *(Off:)* All?

BIRD WOMAN: I want a complete series of all the species in our area—before this land is spoiled. The museums in our country, they all want some. Even our great Smithsonian in Washington, DC.

ELNORA: *(Re-entering:)* Washington, DC?!

BIRD WOMAN: Certainly. I buy samples from you collectors—insects, flowers, grasses. The State Museum in Indianapolis wants wild birds' eggs. Chicago's Field Museum wants nests—when they're vacated, of course.

ELNORA: I've got nests! I'm sorry, what's your name? I don't know what to call you.

BIRD WOMAN: Just call me "The Bird Woman." Everybody does. *(Almost offstage:)* And don't neglect cocoons or creeping

things...any caterpillars you see around. We Limberlost folk have to share our treasures with all the cooped-up city people. Agreed?

(And she's off. Sound of an old-fashioned car cranking up.)

ELNORA: Agreed!

(Sound of car driving off.)

(Ensemble transitions to classroom, where the atmosphere has grown more hospitable.)

SCENE 9

ENSEMBLE: Kingdom, phylum, class, order,
Family, genus, species—
Classifications of biology, defined by Linnaeus.
Biology, the study of all living organisms—including
structure, evolution...
Growth.

(Students gather, reading. Elnora enters, finds a book to read. Thoreau perhaps? Other students notice with interest. They may continue reading during transition into Scene 9.)

(Transition to Comstock cabin. Kate, alone. Wesley knocks.)

KATE: Come in.

WESLEY: Good morning, Kate.

KATE: Morning. *(Pause.)* Maggie send you here for something?

WESLEY: *(Straightforward:)* No, she's busy. Kate, you know Elnora's been helping us at harvest time for years, saved us a considerable amount of money. So we went to town and got some things for high school, and—

KATE: Hold on a minute—

WESLEY: Maggie's finishing up a dress today—

KATE: What put the idea into your head that Elnora would take things bought with your money?

WESLEY: Finding her on the trail, sobbing, after her first day of school.

KATE: Sobbing?

WESLEY: Like her heart would break. She'd been laughed at—she had no good clothes, no money. *(Pause.)* I'm pretty sure you knew that might happen, Kate.

KATE: She wanted to try the world—I let her find things out on her own.

WESLEY: That's unfeeling, Kate—almost unkind. I'm warning you...if things don't go better for that girl, Maggie and I might need to interfere.

KATE: That'd be nothing new—you and Maggie have interfered since she was four!

WESLEY: Interfered?! Us?

KATE: It's been hugs and extra clothes for Elnora—telling her to run to you whenever things are hard. Have you ever tried to make her understand what it's like for me?

WESLEY: Yes, that afternoon on the trail I told her what it was like for you when you lost Robert. And to come to you nice and kind and ask for the money that she needed.

KATE: I have no money—you know that.

WESLEY: But you could. You could sell four thousand dollars' worth of fine lumber off this place easy.

KATE: What!?

WESLEY: You know that. All you've got to do is sign a lease. Everyone around is doing it.

KATE: *(Shocked:)* Cut down trees? For lumber?

WESLEY: It's the future – you've got to face facts!

KATE: (*Passionate:*) Cut Robert's trees? I'd rather die!

WESLEY: Then I'll have to loan her money.

(Elnora enters in a burst of excitement, carrying some books.)

ELNORA: Mother – Uncle Wesley, you're here, too! I have so much to tell you – I've sold enough to pay for books!

(Maggie enters, hiding a dress and some bundles behind her back.)

MAGGIE: Excuse me, Kate, for barging in – I saw Elnora tearing down the path –

ELNORA: Perfect! I was wondering how I'd ever wait to tell you two, and here you are.

MAGGIE: What's happened, dear?

ELNORA: You won't believe it 'til you see – look! (*She takes money out.*) I met a lady called the Bird Woman, and she's going to buy some things I've gathered!

KATE: Buy?

ELNORA: She paid me for some things already, and she'll keep paying me for what I bring in!

KATE: That's some fine luck.

MAGGIE: How wonderful, Elnora!

ELNORA: Isn't it? I can buy my books! If there's anything left over, maybe I could buy some things to wear. (*Noticing:*) What's that, Aunt Maggie? What're you hiding?

(Maggie shakes out the dress she made.)

Are you wearing gingham dresses these days, Aunt Maggie? Or is this for me?

KATE: Of course it is.

MAGGIE: It's the latest style, according to the store clerk. If it fits right, you can wear it in the morning —

ELNORA: Thank you!

MAGGIE: And a few other little things...

(Maggie hands Elnora a couple of bundles.)

WESLEY: *(Warning:)* Maybe hold off a bit now, Maggie —

MAGGIE: And I can show you the newest way to do your hair with this — the shop girl showed me —

(Maggie hands Elnora a wide hair ribbon.)

ELNORA: It's so much — what've you been up to?

KATE: Showering you with things we can't afford.

ELNORA: We can't pay for all of this — Mother's right.

MAGGIE: They're in return for your help. You don't need to pay for them.

ELNORA: I don't know...

MAGGIE: And look, here — we've got some nice new leather boots for you...

ELNORA: Oh. *(Beat.)* Thanks, Aunt Maggie, but I think I'll keep my own boots. They're just right for me in the Limberlost, if I clean them up a bit.

KATE: *(Satisfied:)* I've got things to tend to.

(Kate exits.)

MAGGIE: I made the dress with my two hands. At least try it on?

ELNORA: *(Pause.)* All right...

(Time passes. Night falls. Sounds of the Limberlost.)

(Wesley and Maggie walking home.)

MAGGIE: She's as proud as her mother.

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WESLEY: Maybe that's not a bad thing...

MAGGIE: What do you mean?

WESLEY: Well, suppose we'd raised Elnora—heaped all the love we could on her—petted her, shielded her.

MAGGIE: Yes?

WESLEY: Would she be the same girl she is today—so strong, so independent?

MAGGIE: You bet your life! Loving somebody doesn't hurt 'em. It's what every creature needs.

(In her room, Elnora lights a candle, arranges her books and dress. She shakes out her hair, opens the book to study.)

(Ensemble helps create nighttime environment—sounds, gentle mood.)

SCENE 10

(A shadowy figure—the boy, BILLY—circles Comstock cabin, watching Elnora's lit room. Sounds of crickets, owls, wind in trees...the spirit of nature.)

ELNORA: *(Half to herself, half to the Limberlost:)* In the name of all things good and beautiful, keep me—protect me—keep me, under the shadow of thy wings...

(Ensemble transitions to morning soundscape.)

SCENE 11

(Morning of next day. Elnora dressing in Maggie's new dress and same old work boots. Kate watches Elnora try to fix her hair.)

KATE: *(Regarding Elnora:)* You haven't done your hair like Maggie did it last night.

ELNORA: Guess not.

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KATE: Would you let me try it?

ELNORA: Of course you can.

(Kate tries to fix Elnora's hair. All thumbs, she gives up.)

KATE: I'm not good at this. It looks kind of "peeled," the way I did it. Maybe you should try – but do it loose like Maggie did.

(Elnora does.)

(In another area, lights come up on Bird Woman, at work.)

KATE: *(Handing ribbon to Elnora:)* Here's the new ribbon. *(Watching:)* Good. That's pretty.

ELNORA: Thank you.

KATE: Oh – your lunch pail. Don't forget. Better get to school now.

(Elnora exits.)

(Ensemble evokes morning in Limberlost.)

SCENE 12

(At her spot in Limberlost, Elnora brushes off camouflage and opens her box, searches contents, then freezes with anxiety. Wesley enters.)

WESLEY: Morning. Nice dress, Elnora. If any boys get sassy, just tell me and I'll give them a talking to. *(Pause.)* What's the matter?

ELNORA: I stored money in my box. Someone's been inside it. Look, the ground is trampled all around –

WESLEY: And stole your money, I'll bet – why, I'll –

ELNORA: No, I thought that, too. But the money's here. And there's a note...

WESLEY: A note? What? Let me see that.

(Elnora hands it to Wesley.)

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(Reads aloud:) "Dear Elnory; Don' never leave things in the swamp no more." What in the world? "Somebody might take it, but I'll try to be strong." *(Pause.)* Well, that's a new one. Sounds like someone is thinkin' about robbing you – but tellin' you not to give 'em a chance.

ELNORA: I know.

WESLEY: I don't like it one bit. No being alone out here for you, for a while, Elnora.

ELNORA: I can't do that – I need to be here – and I love it.

WESLEY: What? Well, at least put this darn money in the bank –

ELNORA: I can't. Mother doesn't trust banks.

WESLEY: Blast! *(Pause.)* That mother of yours – she might as well live in the Dark Ages! Why's she so golldarn stubborn? Banks are important in our modern time. *(Pause.)* Sorry. Sometimes Kate makes me blow my stack. I'll help you open an account – take you to the bank myself.

ELNORA: All right.

WESLEY: Well that's music to my ears. *(Pause.)* Now, here's somethin' for you.

(He hands her the lunchbox.)

ELNORA: What's this? A lunchbox?

WESLEY: Consider it payback for my helping you with the bank.

ELNORA: But –

WESLEY: I don't want to hear no contradictions. We both know how you feel about that old pail. *(Pause. Indicating:)* Look inside.

ELNORA: What? Oh, little compartments for the food –

WESLEY: Yep. And Maggie filled 'em.

ELNORA: Some fried chicken—some cake—oh, I bet it's spice cake, my favorite—here's some milk... (*Heartfelt:*) It's wonderful.

WESLEY: You'll accept it?

ELNORA: Yes. It's the nicest "payback" I ever had.

(In another area, lights may reveal Bird Woman studying something under a microscope.)

(Wesley picks up Elnora's framed moths and starts to exit.)

ELNORA: Wait, where are you going with my moth collection?

WESLEY: Givin' you a ride. My buggy is sittin' right behind those trees. Luck is sure with me this mornin'.

ELNORA: Why's that?

WESLEY: This'll be the second thing you accepted from me today.

SCENE 13

(Lights up on Bird Woman in her study, examining Elnora's framed moth collection.)

BIRD WOMAN: Magnificent. I hope you have dozens more. Any cocoons for these?

ELNORA: Here.

(Elnora hands her a frame of chrysalises. Bird Woman examines it briefly.)

BIRD WOMAN: I'd give you fifteen dollars for all you've brought me. Would you be amenable?

(Bird Woman puts hand out, Elnora takes it. They shake.)

ELNORA: Yes, I'm amenable.

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BIRD WOMAN: Good. We have an understanding then. And how is school going for you these days? Better than at first?

ELNORA: Better, yes.

BIRD WOMAN: Hold your dreams tight, keep your sights high, and persevere. What are they, exactly, by the way—your dreams?

ELNORA: I want to teach—to tell other students about what I love. (*Pause.*) Sometimes I even picture the room I'd like to teach in.

BIRD WOMAN: Yes?

ELNORA: A room with a southern exposure—that's best for the flowers and moths I'd bring in for students.

BIRD WOMAN: Grand. You may not get *exactly* what you want, you know. Perhaps no "southern exposure." But your dreams will keep you going in the right direction. Help me carry these to my back room, will you?

ELNORA: The patellas again?

BIRD WOMAN: Indeed, the patellas—not quite what they once were. And you're so strong and nimble.

(Elnora accepts the load and they exit. They chatter as lights fade.)

(Lights up on Kate, alone, looking intently at one of Elnora's books. She turns page with interest.)

(Ensemble creates noise and environment of swamp.)

SCENE 14

(Elnora is on her way to school. She looks at flowers, perhaps picks one or two, observes a butterfly... This may take as long or little as desired. Then she hears something offstage. Soon after, Billy, in ragged clothes, runs in toward her.)

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BILLY: Help – help! Don't let the dog get me!

(Elnora catches him.)

ELNORA: You're all right.

(She holds him. He catches his breath.)

What happened?

BILLY: That farmer set him on me!

(Elnora looks around.)

ELNORA: What farmer?

BILLY: Over there –

ELNORA: How terrible!

BILLY: And all I did was take a few apples. You wouldn't set the dogs on me for that, would ya? And those old apples was just for pigs – you'd give a boy apples if he wanted, wouldn't ya?

ELNORA: I think so – slow down, though –

BILLY: 'Specially if he was so hungry he was all twisty inside?

(He sees her lunchbox on ground.)

If you had somethin' to eat now, you'd give me somethin', wouldn't ya?

ELNORA: My lunch is in there. I'll share it with you.

(Billy brings lunchbox to her. Elnora sits and starts opening box.)

Did you have any breakfast?

BILLY: Nah.

(Elnora searches in lunch.)

Look at all that food!

ELNORA: Any dinner last night?

BILLY: Just an apple and some grapes I found.

ELNORA: That's all? Here —

(Elnora hands Billy some food. He eats it greedily. She watches.)

Whose boy are you?

BILLY: Tom Billings' — but he's took off. He was drinking again, night before last.

ELNORA: "Took off"? Where'd he go?

BILLY: Don't know where he went to. And I don't care.

(Elnora pours half the milk from flask into cup.)

ELNORA: Here. Drink this.

BILLY: Dang —

(Billy drinks.)

Dagnabbit, that was good!

(Elnora laughs.)

Can I have more?

(Elnora empties the flask.)

ELNORA: Finish it.

BILLY: Cripers, thank you!

ELNORA: Do you always talk this way?

BILLY: Sure. Pa says worser every doggone breath he draws.

(Billy drinks.)

ELNORA: Really.

(They sit side by side for a bit.)

BILLY: You wouldn't leave your son, would you?

ELNORA: Course not. What's your name?

(Billy picks up box and looks for more food.)

BILLY: Billy.

(Elnora takes back lunchbox and gives him a sandwich from it. He devours it.)

ELNORA: If I don't go soon, I'll be late for school...

BILLY: 'Least I don't have to do that darned thing.

ELNORA: School? I don't know how I'd live without it.

BILLY: Crikey!

ELNORA: What do you do all day?

BILLY: I'm just around. Lookin'.

ELNORA: "Lookin'"? What does that mean?

BILLY: I just play. Poke around. There's stumps, trees—I like climbin'. Explorin'. Never know just what I'll find...

(Elnora gathers her things.)

ELNORA: Well, I guess I have to go now...

(Elnora straightens her clothes.)

BILLY: Okay. Bye.

ELNORA: You can find me here most mornings, if you need to.

BILLY: I ain't never had nothin' as darn good as this lunch.

ELNORA: Here, then.

(Elnora takes out the rest of her food.)

Take all of it—

BILLY: For real?!

ELNORA: Yup. Bye—

(As Elnora exits, she looks back, waves.)

(Billy eats.)

BILLY: (*Contented:*) Dagnabbit. (*Pause.*) That was goo-ood.

(*He lies down to take a nap.*)

(*Ensemble and lights evoke passing of one or two Limberlost hours.*)

SCENE 15

(*Midday. Billy sleeps near Elnora's open box.*)

(*Wesley enters, holding a stick.*)

WESLEY: Hey there, you little thief! What are you doing with that box?

BILLY: (*Waking:*) I was sleepin'—

WESLEY: And what were you doing before that?

BILLY: Just checkin' for food.

WESLEY: It was you, wasn't it, come here and took Elnora's money?

BILLY: I didn't take her money. (*Pause.*) Well, I did at first, but then I seen her and put it back—

(*Kate enters, carrying firewood, and witnesses their interaction.*)

WESLEY: (*Acknowledging her:*) Kate.

BILLY: —anyways, I left a note!

WESLEY: No-good kids these days.

KATE: Afternoon, Wesley. Who's this?

BILLY: Elnora gave me food—she's a nice girl.

WESLEY: She gave you food?

BILLY: Yup. A ham sandwich and some cake.

WESLEY: What?!

BILLY: Some fried chicken, too.

WESLEY: You ate the lunch Maggie made!

KATE: Go easy, Wesley. The boy looks like he's starving.

WESLEY: I know. Scrounging like some lost dog—

BILLY: I'm Billy! Not a dog!

KATE: Where's your parents, Billy?

BILLY: Pa's gone—I ain't never had no mother.

(Wesley puts stick down.)

WESLEY: Well, tomorrow, I'll come find you, take you to the law. The law will know what to—

BILLY: The law!

WESLEY: Sure. In town. Then your pa won't worry while he's gone.

BILLY: Pa don't care one way or t'other. After he's been drinkin', he just comes home and sleeps.

KATE: Does he feed you good?

BILLY: Sometimes he brings some meat home—splits it between me and his dogs.

WESLEY: You and his—

BILLY: Pa takes most, though. Seems like the dogs and Pa get everything.

KATE: You better come with one of us tonight, boy.

BILLY: Why?

KATE: You need some human shelter. It's the decent thing to do. *(To Wesley:)* Which is it gonna be? Me? Or you two?

WESLEY: You can come with me, I guess.

KATE: You sure you can handle him?

WESLEY: For one night, sure. That's it, though. I'll take him to the law tomorrow.

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BILLY: Cripers, no —

KATE: *(To Billy:)* Patience, Billy. It'll be all right.

BILLY: You sure?

(She hugs him.)

KATE: Yep. I wouldn't lie. They'll take good care of you.

(Kate exits.)

BILLY: She's a nice lady.

WESLEY: *(Dry:)* Well, she's full of surprises, that's for sure. *(Pause.)* How'd you like to have some supper?

BILLY: Supper?

WESLEY: Maybe as much fried chicken as your belly could hold.

BILLY: Aw, gee! I ain't dead yet. Them things's in heaven.

WESLEY: We might find you a bed to spend the night in, too.

BILLY: A bed? Crost' yer heart and hope to die? *(Joyfully:)* Jiminy Cricket! You'd sure as heck be a better pa than mine is!

WESLEY: Now hold your horses...

BILLY: You wouldn't take no meat away from me, would you?

WESLEY: No, but —

BILLY: Or leave me alone?

WESLEY: No, I would not. And neither would Maggie.

BILLY: *(A pause.)* Who's Maggie?

WESLEY: She's my wife.

BILLY: Where's she at?

WESLEY: She lives with me.

BILLY: What'd you go and get married for? Pa says wives are no good.

WESLEY: Well, that's not so.

BILLY: They might not like boys, anyways.

WESLEY: She likes me, and I used to be a boy.

(In another area, lights may reveal Maggie pinning up laundry.)

BILLY: Lots of old ladies don't like boys –

WESLEY: She's not an old lady, Billy.

BILLY: Well, most ladies don't like boys when those boys is dirty – 'specially in their house!

WESLEY: *(A pause.)* You may be right. We can wash you up once we get there. She might like you better clean.

BILLY: She's gonna' see me dirty, first, though.

(Ensemble creates Limberlost's warm, late afternoon environment.)

SCENE 16

(Sinton Household. Maggie hangs the wash outside, sings, whistles or hums some old-fashioned American song or hymn [lyrical, medium tempo], like "Blessed be the Tie that Binds," "Simple Gifts," "Cotton-Eyed Joe," etc...)

MAGGIE: *(Singing:)* "Where'd you come from—where did you go...where'd you come from, Cotton-eyed Joe? *(Pause.)* Well, I come for to see you – come for to sing..."

(Unseen, Wesley and Billy enter.)

(Still singing:) "I come for to show you my diamond..."

WESLEY: Maggie?

MAGGIE: You home already? *(Seeing Billy:)* Oh! Where in the name of sense did you get that child?

WESLEY: Well...

MAGGIE: He's so dirty!

BILLY: *(To Wesley:)* Told ya.

WESLEY: Billy, go off and play for a while.

(Billy exits.)

MAGGIE: Who's that?!

WESLEY: Turns out he's the one who's been hanging around, leaving notes for Elnora, and...

MAGGIE: And stealing things?

WESLEY: Not exactly...

MAGGIE: What a mess he is! His hair – his clothes –

WESLEY: He's practically starving – been grubbing food all week. The father's skipped town – drunkard, far as I can figure. I thought the best thing was to bring the boy to shelter –

MAGGIE: The wild child, you mean.

WESLEY: Just for the night –

MAGGIE: But he's like some mangy dog!

WESLEY: *(Firm:)* He's not a dog, Maggie. He's a boy. And I promised him some supper and a place to sleep.

MAGGIE: To sleep?! Well, that takes the cake!

WESLEY: One night. Have you got any water heated up? I'll bathe him – this'll do. *(Indicates an old tub.)*

(Commotion offstage with cats.)

MAGGIE: What's that noise?

(Maggie runs to see.)

WESLEY: What in the –

MAGGIE: Oh! My kittens!

WESLEY: Kittens?

MAGGIE: Look! He's trying to tie their tails together!

WESLEY: (*Stern:*) Stop that, Billy!

(Noises stop.)

Come here! (*To Maggie:*) Help me, Maggie, will you? Bring me some heated water – and some soap and towels.

(Billy re-enters. Maggie exits.)

BILLY: You said she was a nice lady.

WESLEY: She is. What got into you?

BILLY: Nothin'. (*Pause.*) She's mean.

WESLEY: No. She's just not used to little boys.

BILLY: (*Unhappy:*) You said we were gonna have fried chicken!

(Maggie returns with heated water and items.)

WESLEY: We'll see.

BILLY: What does that mean?

WESLEY: Just be patient.

BILLY: What does –

WESLEY: (*Firm:*) Shh.

MAGGIE: Here.

(Maggie sets things out, pours water into tub. Wesley starts peeling off some of Billy's clothes.)

WESLEY: All right. Hold still now. I need to clean you good. (*Wesley starts process. Quiet:*) Lord almighty.

MAGGIE: What?

WESLEY: He's got sores.

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MAGGIE: (*Shocked:*) Sores?

(*Maggie begins to empathize.*)

WESLEY: They'll need tending. (*To Maggie:*) Hand me some towels, please?

(*Maggie hands him towels.*)

MAGGIE: Peroxide, too?

WESLEY: Yep.

(*Maggie hands him bottle.*)

MAGGIE: Thought you might need some.

WESLEY: Here we go.

(*Proceeds with washing, Maggie watches.*)

Hold still, Billy. I'm going to put some medicine on these. It's going to sting like fire, but that's the way they'll heal. Don't move now.

(*Billy endures washing, with a little squirming and noise perhaps.*)

BILLY: When will I be clean—

WESLEY: I said, hold on—

BILLY: Am I clean now—

WESLEY: Hold your horses—

BILLY: Now?

WESLEY: Yes! Well, close enough.

BILLY: Yay!

WESLEY: And if we put good things into your stomach, that'll start to heal the rest.

BILLY: Good. Cause I'm hungry.

WESLEY: (*To Maggie:*) How long till his supper, Maggie?

MAGGIE: I'll check. Here's an old shirt for him.

(Maggie hands over one of Wesley old shirts; goes inside. Wesley dresses Billy.)

BILLY: Ain't never been this clean.

WESLEY: No?

BILLY: Feels strange, kinda...

WESLEY: I'll bet.

MAGGIE: *(Calling from inside:)* Dinner's ready.

(Wesley and Billy enter the house.)

BILLY: We never had a red tablecloth like this. It's pretty.

(Wesley places a thick book on a chair, lifts Billy onto it. Billy eats voraciously.)

BILLY: You said I was gonna sleep here?

WESLEY: Sure you are. *(Pause.)* Where can he sleep, Maggie?

MAGGIE: *(Stiffly:)* I don't know.

WESLEY: Our spare bed?

MAGGIE: *(Shocked, but stops herself:)* Oh, I don't—

BILLY: I can sleep any place—on the floor, anywhere. Home, I sleep in a store box, top of Pa's coat.

MAGGIE: In a store box?

WESLEY: We'll make you a nest. *(Wesley retrieves blankets.)* This may not be the nice bed a boy should have, but it'll beat a store box, all hollow.

(Billy lies down, tries to settle.)

BILLY: This feels so lost, like. I wish Pa was here.

WESLEY: Won't I do, Billy?

BILLY: *(To Maggie:)* You don't like boys, do you?

MAGGIE: (*Uncomfortable:*) I like good boys.

BILLY: I'm a good boy.

MAGGIE: Good boys don't hurt helpless kittens.

BILLY: I didn't mean to hurt those kittens. (*Turns to Wesley:*) Tell her! I didn't mean to!

WESLEY: I don't think you did, Billy.

(Maggie looks away. Beat.)

BILLY: Sometimes at night, I used to lay my head on Pa's lap.

WESLEY: Show her, Billy.

(Wesley motions him to go to Maggie. Billy goes to her.)

BILLY: Like this, I mean.

(Tries laying head in Maggie's lap. She's uneasy. Billy can tell.)

Your lap is hard. (*Pause.*) I wish Pa was here.

(He starts to cry. Maggie, stunned, does nothing. Then tries to console, gradually. Perhaps stroking or rocking a bit.)

MAGGIE: There, there.

(Billy calms. Wesley is pleased.)

WESLEY: (*Calm:*) Well, now. I'm going out to watch the sky.

(Wesley exits. For a moment or two, Maggie is alone with the sleeping child. Elnora gently knocks on the door and enters.)

ELNORA: Mother told me he was here. (*Pause.*) Billy. Huh.

(Elnora sits and watches them.)

MAGGIE: I don't know what to do. I'm frightened.

ELNORA: Why?

MAGGIE: What if Wesley wants to keep him? A girl like you, I could handle easy. But boys can be so wild – this boy's stolen things.

ELNORA: He took the money back. And who could blame him for wanting food?

MAGGIE: Well...

ELNORA: Or to be held? We all want that.

MAGGIE: I watched Wesley handle him this afternoon. He was so gentle. Where'd he learn that?

ELNORA: He's always been like that. But so have you, Maggie.

MAGGIE: My goodness, how can you understand these things when you've had so little...warmth, I guess I mean.

(A pause.)

ELNORA: Well, everything seems to be going better now – with my friends, with my classes... *(Pause.)* Maybe my going to school will turn her around. Maybe Mother will...soften. I'm thinking maybe.

MAGGIE: A dog doesn't change its spots overnight, Elnora. Anyway, the best thing about going to school is how it pleases you.

ELNORA: I heard the orchestra play at school last week – the music was so beautiful. Especially the violins. *(Pause.)* I'd like to learn to play.

I had a dream last night that father was playing the violin. I can still see him plain as life. There he was.

(A PALE MAN dressed in green enters silently and mimes playing the violin.)

It was summer and all the flowers were in bloom. He wore gray trousers and a blue shirt, and his eyes were smiling. He held a violin. His bow went back and forth above the strings, his head was bent above them...and when he played – it was like the music of the Limberlost...like the wind or the sound of birds. *(Pause.)* And his face was beautiful.

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I'd like to make music like that. Do you think I could? Would it be wrong for me to take part of my money and buy a cheap one? Would it? Would it, Aunt Maggie?

MAGGIE: A cheap violin? Oh, no. Got to have a fine fiddle to make it sing. That's what your father used to say. (*Pause.*) But you don't have to buy one. You should have your father's.

ELNORA: What?! My father's? My father played the violin?

MAGGIE: Indeed he did.

ELNORA: But no one ever –

MAGGIE: I know, I know –

ELNORA: Where is it? In our house somewhere?

MAGGIE: It's here. I've got it—no one knows but Uncle Wesley. Look in that cupboard there—underneath the pile of fabric.

(Elnora searches.)

Your father played it like a master. I can see him now—goodness, what a handsome man—

(Elnora brings out the violin.)

ELNORA: Why do you have this and not my mother?

MAGGIE: It was too hard for her to keep it. But I couldn't bear to toss it, like she told us. (*Pointed:*) Elnora, do not breathe a word of this.

ELNORA: (*Oblivious:*) It's so wonderful...

MAGGIE: It needs varnishing and new strings. (*Remembering:*) No one could make you dance like he could. It was like some spark he had—I think you call it inspiration?

ELNORA: (*In her own world:*) I can see him—plain as life—like I did last night.

MAGGIE: You didn't see him, Elnora, you were dreaming—

ELNORA: He was *beautiful*. I reached out to touch him –

(There's a knock at the door.)

– and then he disappeared.

KATE: Elnora, are you in there?

(Elnora hands violin to Maggie. Maggie covers it with a blanket.)

MAGGIE: *(To Elnora:)* Shhh. *(To Maggie:)* Come in.

(Kate enters, sees Billy.)

KATE: Evening. *(Indicating Billy:)* That child going to be all right?

MAGGIE: I think so.

KATE: The way you're holding that poor boy's head, Maggie, sorta looks like it might crack.

MAGGIE: Oh dear. Does it now?

KATE: Probably, you just need a little practice. Hold him more like...

(Kate adjusts them.)

Like so.

(Billy sighs.)

Good. Now he'll feel more peaceful.

MAGGIE: Thanks. I'm doing my best, Kate.

KATE: I know the feeling.

ELNORA: *(To Kate:)* I didn't know you liked children, Mother.

KATE: I do like children. *(Pause.)* There's a lot you don't know about me, Elnora. And...it's getting dark. How about the two of us head home?

ELNORA: Alright.

KATE: (*Smiles a bit:*) Chicken Fricassee for dinner.

(Kate exits. Elnora uncovers the violin, takes another peek at it, then smiles and shows crossed fingers at Maggie. She exits.)

(Ensemble creates nighttime sounds and feel of Limberlost.)

PART II**SCENE 1**

CONTEMPORARY GIRL: *(To audience:)* Four months passed, and Elnora went to school. Fall turned to winter. And as usual, winter began to turn to spring. Birds returned. Nests started to be made. Life began again...

(Ensemble creates seasonal transition with lights and sound.)

(Comstock cabin, morning. Elnora finishing breakfast.)

ELNORA: What a breakfast – biscuits, sausage, oatmeal –

KATE: Glad you liked it.

ELNORA: Delicious!

KATE: It's just a mother's job. A body needs food that sticks to the ribs when there's a chill in the air.

ELNORA: Spring's on its way, though. You won't need to cook as much.

KATE: With longer days now, hens'll soon be laying more. Eggs for breakfast soon!

ELNORA: Alright, if you insist! *(Pause.)* Wildflowers have started blooming.

KATE: I hadn't noticed.

ELNORA: That's because you work so hard! Bluebells were everywhere in the woods yesterday.

KATE: That so?

(In another area, lights may reveal Bird Woman looking through a microscope.)

ELNORA: "Mertensia virginica." And violets, too – "Viola Sororia." They're most everywhere.

KATE: *(Dry, but amused:)* Could have fooled me.

ELNORA: Those are their scientific names.

KATE: Figured.

ELNORA: (*A pause.*) I haven't helped around here as much this winter. Sorry. I've been so busy —

KATE: To be expected, I suppose. We'll get by. Here's your lunch. Don't be late, now —

(Hands Elnora her new lunchbox, packed.)

ELNORA: I can tell that you've been trying, Mother. (*Awkward:*) Thank you, I...

KATE: No need. Words don't work so easy. (*Pause.*) Might get warm enough today that I could turn the field over. Maybe even warm enough to seed. Think Billy'd like to help me?

ELNORA: I bet he would.

KATE: I'll ask. See you at dinner, then. I'm making your favorite stew tonight. Six o'clock sharp?

ELNORA: Thanks! Yes, six o'clock sharp!

(Ensemble transition. They're sharing a school project; they gesture to Elnora to join. She does.)

SCENE 2

(Lights up on Bird Woman. By her side is ROBIN, a classmate of Elnora's.)

ROBIN: Can't we just use the normal names? Like "bumblebee"?

BIRD WOMAN: You mean instead of "Bombus lapidarius"?

ROBIN: Yes! Those words are hard.

BIRD WOMAN: The Latin names make it specific—no confusion. In our world, that's a precious thing. Clarity and communication. Two words I try to live by.

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(Elnora enters.)

Greetings, Elnora. Your classmate Robin said that biology was grand.

ROBIN: Hello.

ELNORA: Hello again.

BIRD WOMAN: Robin will serve as an occasional intern, as you do. I'd like for you to learn to work together. Collaboration, mutual support—essential skills for science. And most important, for happy lives.

ROBIN: I like your hair ribbon, Elnora.

ELNORA: Thanks.

BIRD WOMAN: Very pretty. Ribbons and clothes can be pleasant—quite enjoyable, at times. I myself feel better when I have a crisp new blouse on.

ROBIN: Do you?

BIRD WOMAN: Indeed, I do—then I'm all set, groomed, and ready for the world.

ROBIN: Like on the first day of school? When everything's fresh and new?

ELNORA: For some, maybe.

ROBIN: Oh—sorry. I forgot.

BIRD WOMAN: What's this?

ELNORA: I had on an old dress and muddy boots. It was awful.

ROBIN: I wasn't thinking—

ELNORA: It's okay.

BIRD WOMAN: You know, that good "new clothes" feeling doesn't always last.

ROBIN: I know! I had a new coat this winter – I felt so good in it at first. But by the next month, I felt like usual.

BIRD WOMAN: I'm at my very best when I'm doing what I love – field work, science...that's when I feel most alive.

ROBIN: You're often very lively!

BIRD WOMAN: My studies spark my life. They're my inspiration. It was my life's dream – biology – and it took me years of work. But here I am. Living proof that dreams can come true.

ELNORA: But can dreams come true for anyone?

BIRD WOMAN: That depends.

(In another area, lights may reveal Kate, alone in garden.)

ROBIN: My brother's dream is to drive a train. He's nuts about it.

BIRD WOMAN: My brother's dream was to drive a streetcar!

ELNORA: And does he?

BIRD WOMAN: No, he became a doctor. But he's one of the first to own an automobile. How he loves motoring down country roads to see his patients in his red roadster!

ELNORA: I can just see it!

BIRD WOMAN: All our dreams are different. When it comes to dreams "coming true," luck also plays a role. But if you figure out your dreams when you're young, your life's true work can follow.

ELNORA: Mother says all she ever wanted was to farm. She loves it. I don't, though.

BIRD WOMAN: Does your father farm, too?

(A pause.)

ELNORA: He used to, before...

BIRD WOMAN: Before?

ELNORA: He took a job at a sawmill in the city, to earn more money. My mother didn't want him to. *(Pause.)* Then there was a fire in the mill. *(Pause.)* He died.

ROBIN: Your father died in a fire?

(Beat.)

BIRD WOMAN: So now your mother farms alone.

ELNORA: Yes.

BIRD WOMAN: Well, she deserves great credit—it's hard work. And important. She must be a brave woman. *(Pause.)* Remind me, girls—I have science scholarships to discuss before you leave—

ROBIN: Science scholarships?

BIRD WOMAN: For promising high school students. *(Looks to Elnora:)* If you apply—and I hope you do—a parent must fill out a simple form.

ELNORA: A form?

BIRD WOMAN: I need permission from a parent. Now let's get to work. See what I brought in?

ELNORA: Anisopteras! How wonderful!

BIRD WOMAN: That's exactly right, Elnora. Dragonflies. Let's get to work—time flies, young friends. "Tempus fugit."

ELNORA: Oh! It's not five o'clock yet, is it?

BIRD WOMAN: Actually, it's almost six.

ELNORA: Six?! Oh no! I've got to go—Mother's waiting—

(In another area, lights may reveal Billy examining something in the woods, then may fade until his entrance.)

BIRD WOMAN: *(To Elnora as she exits:)* Run, then! Nice boots, Elnora—just right for research in the swamp.

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(Elnora exits. Ensemble evokes early evening in Limberlost.)

SCENE 3

(Comstock cabin. Kate waits alone, knitting at kitchen table, set for dinner. After a few beats, Elnora enters.)

KATE: It's almost seven. You said you'd be home by six.

ELNORA: Time just flew! There was a new intern at the Bird Woman's – Robin – and we talked and talked –

KATE: Sit. The food's cold though...

(Kate starts serving food.)

ELNORA: That's okay. Robin and I are in class together – and we're both in choir, too. *(Pause.)* That reminds me – I might need to stay at the Bird Woman's house night after next.

KATE: Oh?

ELNORA: There's a choir concert. *(Pause.)* I know you can't be there; I know you hate to go to town.

KATE: *(Serving:)* Here. Some stew.

ELNORA: There's a special program this summer. The Bird Woman told us about it.

(Kate becomes more defensive.)

KATE: Your food, Elnora. I made it special.

ELNORA: Some students who are interested in science – who show "promise," that's what she said. I'd get to study for a month with scientists.

KATE: A month?!

ELNORA: Yup, at the university, in the capital. Oh, and there's no need to worry about the money – the Bird Woman thinks I'll get a scholarship. She's so helpful.

KATE: *(Stung:)* Well then why come to me?

ELNORA: I need your permission. It's just a simple—

KATE: So you need me now?

ELNORA: I don't need you, I need your signature. It's what they require. *(Beat.)* Sorry. That's not what I meant.

KATE: No? I think it's exactly what you meant.

ELNORA: It's not, though—

KATE: High school, scholarships, science—a far cry from anything I know. I must be pretty boring.

ELNORA: No! You know lots of things—you've taught me most of what I know.

KATE: Have I.

ELNORA: How to read and write, how to farm—all about the Limberlost—

KATE: These new folks sure seem to do it better.

ELNORA: What they know is different, that's all—they've studied, have degrees—

KATE: Their degrees don't mean anything to me.

ELNORA: I know they don't. But if I got one, I could teach—at a college, or a university—

KATE: A "university" again?

ELNORA: Women do that these days! The Bird Woman did—

KATE: The Bird Woman, the Bird Woman—it's always about her these days—

ELNORA: No, it's not, she's—

KATE: —seems my kind of life isn't good enough, anymore—

ELNORA: But I want to be an entomologist, not a farmer!

KATE: Course I don't even know what that is!

ELNORA: An entomologist studies insects. It's what I love!

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(Billy rushes in.)

KATE: Billy.

BILLY: You should see the snappin' turtle on the path...

ELNORA: Mother, listen –

KATE: Enough, Elnora.

BILLY: *(Getting that his timing is bad:)* Uh-oh.

ELNORA: Please give me your permission, Mother. I really want to go, because –

KATE: I said enough!

ELNORA: You know I could just forge your signature, don't you?

BILLY: What're you two arguing about?

KATE: Stop! The boy.

ELNORA: But I wouldn't – that'd be wrong. You taught me that, knowing right from wrong.

KATE: *(Cold:)* Elnora. You must have homework.

ELNORA: Mother, please don't –

KATE: Or chores. Chicken coops need cleaning.

ELNORA: So that's how you want to handle things? Pretend nothing's happening? *(Pause.)* Fine. I'm going out to do my chores. Don't bother waiting up.

(Elnora exits. Beat.)

KATE: What were you saying, Billy?

BILLY: Nothin'.

KATE: About that turtle you saw –

BILLY: Why won't you help Elnora, Aunt Kate?

KATE: She takes care of herself now, Billy.

BILLY: You mean like I did? When I was alone?

KATE: No, you were left. That's completely different.

BILLY: Maybe she feels the same way.

KATE: How's that?

BILLY: Lonely, I mean.

KATE: No, she's got lots of friends.

BILLY: But can't she still feel lonely?

KATE: Billy. Best leave this alone. You don't know a thing about it.

BILLY: I didn't even know I was lonely till you hugged me. Why don't you hug Elnora?

KATE: I do. *(Pause.)* Sometimes.

BILLY: I never seen it.

KATE: Enough now! *(Pause.)* Exactly where was that snappin' turtle? On the path, you say?

BILLY: I'm goin' home now, Kate. *(Without turning:)* 'Bye.

KATE: Billy —

(Billy exits. Silence. Kate is alone.)

KATE: *(Beat.)* Lord. *(Pause.)* The awful quiet.

(Ensemble transitions, evoking the Limberlost environment.)

SCENE 4

(Her favorite Limberlost spot, late afternoon the next day. Elnora is alone. The light is golden, dappled. Elnora unloads her book strap, puts down her violin case, takes off her spring coat, spreads it on the ground, sits. Ensemble may gradually disperse. Elnora gets out the violin and tunes it. She plays simply, evocatively – like birdsong, like nature.)

(Pale Man appears behind her. He mimes playing the violin. She looks up and out, as if sensing a beloved presence. She plays, happily.)

(Billy watches from a distance.)

SCENE 5

(Sinton household, next day. Wesley enters.)

WESLEY: Concert begins at eight o'clock—come on everybody.

MAGGIE: Coming—

(Maggie enters.)

WESLEY: Elnora told us to get there early for good seats—

(Billy enters.)

MAGGIE: Patience, Wesley. Billy and I just finished with the dishes—

BILLY: I didn't break a one! I like doing dishes.

MAGGIE: You did a fine job tonight, too.

BILLY: Better than last week, right?

MAGGIE: Right. Real progress.

WESLEY: Sure is. All right, folks, let's go...

MAGGIE: Maybe Uncle Wesley'll let you hold the reins going into town.

BILLY: Yay!

WESLEY: Maybe. How about we stop by Kate's—see if she wants to come, too.

MAGGIE: Oh, I don't think so, Wesley.

WESLEY: No? But Elnora says she's been better lately.

MAGGIE: So Elnora says. I still worry.

BILLY: I saw them fightin' up a storm when I was there last.

MAGGIE: Oh, dear. *(To Wesley:)* You hear that? That was just two days ago.

BILLY: Will Elnora be playing her violin tonight at the concert?

MAGGIE: What?! No! Never!

BILLY: But I heard her practicing in the Limberlost today –

MAGGIE: Wasn't anybody else there, though, was there?

BILLY: Nope, just me.

MAGGIE: That's right, because the violin's a secret. And it needs to stay that way.

BILLY: But why?

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