

# THE LIGHT IN THE CLEARING

A TALE OF THE NORTH COUNTRY  
IN THE TIME OF SILAS WRIGHT

By  
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AUTHOR OF  
"MIDNIGHT, DREAM AND I, BARREL OF THE BLESSED ISLES,  
KEEPING UP WITH LIZZIE, ETC., ETC."

When I asked what were "nospanks" she told me that they were part of the wages of a good child. I was better paid for my care of the watermelon vine, for its growth was measured with a string every day and kept me interested. One morning I found five blossoms on it. I picked one and carried it to Aunt Deel. Another I destroyed in the tragedy of catching

a bumblebee which had crawled into its cup. In due time three small melons appeared. When they were as big as a baseball I picked two of them. One I tasted and threw away as I ran to the pump for relief. The other I hurled at a dog on my way to school.

So that last melon on the vine had my undivided affection. It grew in size and reputation, and soon I learned that a reputation is about the worst thing that a watermelon can acquire while it is on the vine. I invited everybody that came to the house to go and see my watermelon. They looked it over and said pleasant things about it. When I was a boy people used to treat children and watermelons with a like solicitude. Both were a subject for jests and produced similar reactions in the human countenance.

At last Uncle Peabody agreed with me that it was about time to pick the melon. I decided to pick it immediately after meeting on Sunday, so that I could give it to my aunt and uncle at dinner-time. When we got home I ran for the garden. My feet and those of our friends and neighbors had literally worn a path to the melon. In eager haste I got my little wheelbarrow and ran with it to the end of that path. There I found nothing but broken vines! The melon had vanished. I ran back to the house almost overcome by a feeling

of awe, for I had thought long of that hour of pride when I should bring the melon and present it to my aunt and uncle.

"Uncle Peabody," I shouted, "my melon is gone."  
"Well, I van!" said he, "somebody must 'a' stole it."  
"But it was my melon," I said with a trembling voice.

"Yes, and I van it's too bad! But, Bart, you ain't learned yet that there are wicked people in the world who come and take what don't belong to 'em."

There were tears in my eyes when I asked:  
"They'll bring it back, won't they?"

"Never!" said Uncle Peabody, "I'm afraid they've 't' it up."

He had no sooner said it than a cry broke from my lips, and I sank down upon the grass moaning and sobbing. I lay amidst the ruins of the simple faith of childhood. It was as if the world and all its joys had come to an end.

Aunt Deel spoke in a low, kindly tone and came and lifted me to my feet very tenderly.

"Come, Bart, don't feel so about that old melon," said she, "it ain't worth it. Come with me. I'm going to give you a present—ayes I be!"

I was still crying when she took me to her trunk, and offered the grateful assuagement of candy and a belt, all embroidered with blue and white beads.

"Now you see, Bart, how low and mean anybody is that takes what don't belong to 'em—ayes! They're snakes! Everybody hates 'em an' stamps on 'em when they come in sight—ayes!"

The abomination of the Lord was in her look and manner. How it

shook my soul! He who had taken the watermelon had also taken from me something I was never to have again, and a very wonderful thing it was—faith in the goodness of men. My eyes had seen evil. The world had committed its first offense against me and my spirit was no longer the white and beautiful thing it had been. Still, therein is the beginning of wisdom and, looking down the long vista of the years, I thank God for the great harvest of the lost watermelon. Better things had come in its place—understanding and what more, often I have vainly tried to estimate. For one thing that sudden revelation of the heart of childhood had lifted my aunt's out of the cold storage of a puritanic spirit, and warmed it into new life and opened its door for me.

In the afternoon she sent me over to Willis' to borrow a little tea. I stopped for a few minutes to play with Henry Willis—a boy not quite a year older than I. While playing there I discovered a piece of the rind of my melon in the dooryard. On that piece of rind I saw the cross which I had made one day with my thumb-nail. It was intended to indicate that the melon was solely and wholly mine. I felt a flush of anger. "I hate you," I said as I approached him.

"I hate you," he answered.

"You're a snake!" I said.

We now stood, face to face and breast to breast, like a pair of young roosters. He gave me a shove and told me to go home. I gave him a shove and told him I wouldn't. I pushed up close to him again and we glared into each other's eyes.

Suddenly he spat in my face. I gave him a scratch on the forehead with my finger-nails. Then we fell upon each other and rolled on the ground and hit and scratched with feline ferocity.

Mrs. Willis ran out of the house and parted us. Our blood was hot, and leaking through the skin of our faces a little.

"He pitched on me," Henry explained.

I couldn't speak.

"Go right home—this minute—you brat!" said Mrs. Willis in anger. "Here's your tea. Don't you ever come here again."

I took the tea and started down the road weeping. What a bitter day that was for me! I dreaded to face my aunt and uncle. Coming through the grove down by our gate I met Uncle Peabody. With the keen insight of the father of the prodigal son he had seen me coming "a long way off" and shouted:

"Well, here ye be—I was kind o' worried, Bub."

Then his eye caught the look of dejection in my gait and figure. He hurried toward me. He stopped as I came sobbing to his feet.

"Why, what's the matter?" he asked gently, as he took the tea cup from my hand, and sat down upon his heels.

I could only fall into his arms and express myself in the grief of childhood. He hugged me close and begged me to tell him what was the matter.

"That Willis boy stole my melon," I said, and the words came slow with sobs.

"Oh, no, he didn't," said Uncle Peabody.

"Yes he did. I saw a piece o' the rind."

"Well by—" said Uncle Peabody, stopping, as usual, at the edge of the precipice.

"He's a snake," I added.

"And you fit and he scratched you up that way?"

"I scratched him, too."

"Don't you say a word about it to Aunt Deel. Don't ever speak o' that miserable melon ag'in to anybody. You scot around to the barn, an' I'll be there in a minute and fix ye up."

He went by the road with the tea and I ran around to the lane and up to the stable. Uncle Peabody met me there in a moment and brought a pail of water and washed my face so that I felt and looked more respectable.

The worst was over for that day, but the Baynes-Willis feud had begun. It led to many a fight in the school yard and on the way home. We were so evenly matched that our quarrel went on for a long time and gathered intensity as it continued.

One June day Uncle Peabody and I, from down in the fields, saw a fine carriage drive in at our gate. He stopped and looked intently.

"Jerusalem four-corners!" he exclaimed. "It's Mr. and Mrs. Horace Dunkelberg."

My heart beat fast at thought of the legendary Dunkelbergs. Uncle looked me over from top to toe. "Heavens!" he exclaimed. "Go down to the brook and wash the mud off yer feet an' legs."

I ran for the brook and before I had returned to my uncle I heard the horn blow.

"The Dunkelbergs!—the Dunkelbergs! Come quick!" it seemed to say.

Mr. Dunkelberg was a big, broad-shouldered, solemn-looking man. Somehow his face reminded me of a lion's which I had seen in one of my picture books. He had a thick, long, outstanding mustache and side whiskers, and deep-set eyes and heavy eyebrows. He stood for half a moment looking down at me from a great height with his right hand in his pocket. I heard a little jingle of coins down where his hand was. It excited my curiosity. He took a step toward me and I retreated. I feared, a little, this big, lion-like man. My fears left me suddenly when he spoke in a small squeaky voice that reminded me of the chirping of a bird.

"Little boy, come here and I will make you a present," said he.

It reminded me of my disappointment when Uncle tried to shoot his gun at a squirrel and only the cap cracked.

I went to him and he laid a silver piece in the palm of my hand. Aunt Deel began to hurry about getting dinner ready while Uncle Peabody and I sat down on the porch with our guests, among whom was a pretty, blue-eyed girl of about my own age.



"Sally, this is Barton Baynes. Can't You Shake Hands With Him?" Said Mrs. Dunkelberg.

with long, golden-brown hair that hung in curls.

"Sally, this is Barton Baynes—can't you shake hands with him?" said Mrs. Dunkelberg.

With a smile the girl came and offered me her hand and made a funny bow and said that she was glad to see me. I took her hand awkwardly and made no reply. I had never seen many girls and had no very high opinion of them.

As we sat there I heard the men talking about the great Silas Wright, who had just returned to his home in Canton. He had not entered my consciousness until then.

While I sat listening I felt a twerk of my hair, and looking around I saw the Dunkelberg girl standing behind me with a saucy smile on her face.

"Won't you come and play with me?" she asked.

I took her out in the garden to show her where my watermelon had lain. At the moment I couldn't think of anything else to show her. As we walked along I observed that her feet were in dainty shiny button-shoes. Suddenly I began to be ashamed of my feet that were browned by the sunlight and scratched by the briars. The absent watermelon didn't seem to interest her.

"Let's play house in the grove," said she, and showed me how to build a house by laying rows of stones with an opening for a door.

"Now you be my husband," said she.

Oddly enough I had heard of husbands but had only a shadowy notion of what they were. I knew that there was none in our house.

"What's that?" I asked.

She laughed and answered: "Somebody that a girl is married to."

"You mean a father?"

"Yes."

"Once I had a father," I boasted.

"Well, we'll play we're married and that you have just got home from a journey. You go out in the woods and then you come home and I'll meet you at the door."

I did as she bade me but I was not glad enough to see her.

"You must kiss me," she prompted in a whisper.

I kissed her very swiftly and gingerly—like one picking up a hot coal—and she caught me in her arms and kissed me three times while her soft hair threw its golden veil over our faces.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you," she said as she drew away from me and shook back her hair.

"Golly! this is fun!" I said.

"Now go to sleep and I'll tell you a story," said she.

Then she told pretty tales of fairies and of grand ladies and noble gentlemen who wore gold coats and swords and diamonds and silks, and said wonderful words in such a wonderful way. I dare say it prospered all the better in my ears because of the mystery by which its meanings were partly hidden. I had many questions to ask and she told me what were fairies and silks and diamonds and grand ladies and noble gentlemen.

We sat down to one of our familiar dinners of salt pork and milk gravy and apple pie now enriched by sweet pickles and preserves and frosted cake.

A query had entered my mind and soon after we had begun eating I asked:

"Aunt Deel, what is the difference between a boy and a girl?"

There was a little silence in which

my aunt drew in her breath and exclaimed, "Why!" and turned very red and covered her face with her napkin. Uncle Peabody laughed so loudly that the chickens began to cackle. Mr. and Mrs. Dunkelberg also covered their faces. Aunt Deel rose and went to the stove and shoved the teapot along, exclaiming:

"Goodness gracious sakes alive!"

The tea stopped over on the stove. Uncle Peabody laughed louder and Mr. Dunkelberg's face was purple. Sleep came running into the house just as I ran out of it. I had made up my mind that I had done something worse than tipping over a what-not. Thoroughly frightened I fled and took refuge behind the ash-house, where Sally found me. I knew of one thing I would never do again. She coaxed me into the grove where we had another play spell.

I needed just that kind of thing, and what a time it was for me! A pleasant sadness comes when I think of that day—it was so long ago. As the Dunkelbergs left us I stood looking down the road on which they were disappearing. That evening my ears caught a note of sadness in the voice of the katydids, and memory began to play its part with me. Best of all I remembered the kisses and the bright blue eyes and the soft curly hair with the smell of roses in it.

Continued next week

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