

THE LIGHT IN THE CLEARING

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

By IRVING BACHELLER

AUTHOR OF
"BEN HOLDEN, D'YI AND I, BARREL OF THE BLESSED ISLES,
KEEPING UP WITH LIZZIE, ETC., ETC."

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

CHAPTER I—Barton Baynes, orphan, is taken to live with his uncle, Peabody Baynes, and his Aunt Deel on a farm on Blatleroad in a neighborhood called Lack-itsygit, about the year 1838. Barton meets Sally Dunkelberg, about his own age, but socially of a class above the Bayneses, and is fascinated by the pretty face and fine clothes.

CHAPTER II—Barton meets loving Kate, known in the neighborhood as the "Silent Woman." Amos Grimshaw, young son of the richest man in the township, is a visitor at the Baynes home, and loving Kate tells the fortunes of the two boys, predicting a bright future for Barton and death on the gallows for Amos. Reproved for an act of boyish mischief, Barton runs away, intending to make his home with the Dunkelbergs. He reaches the village of Canton and falls into a sleep of exhaustion on a porch. There he is found by Silas Wright, Jr., prominent man in public affairs, who, knowing Peabody Baynes, takes Barton home after buying him new clothes.

CHAPTER III—Barton and his uncle and aunt visit Canton and hear Silas Wright read a sermon.

CHAPTER IV—Silas Wright evinces much interest in Barton, and sends a box of books and magazines to the Baynes home. The election of Silas Wright to the United States senate is announced.

We hitched our team to the grass-hopper spring wagon and set out on our journey. It was a warm, hazy Indian-summer day in November. As we passed "the mill" we saw the Silent Woman looking out of the little window of her room above the blacksmith shop—a low, weather-stained, frame building, hard by the main road, with a narrow hanging stair on the side of it.

"She keeps watch by the window when she ain't travelin'," said Uncle Peabody. "Knows all that's goin' on—that woman—knows who goes to the village an' how long they stay. When Grimshaw goes by they say she hustles off down the road in her rags. She looks like a sick dog herself, but I've heard that she keeps that room

o' hers just as neat as a pin."

Near the village we passed a smart-looking buggy, drawn by a spy-footed horse in shiny harness. Then I noticed with a pang that our wagon was covered with dry mud and that our horses were rather bony and that our harness a kind of lead color. So I was in an humble state of mind when we entered the village.

There was a crowd of men and women in front of Mr. Wright's office and through its open door I saw many of his fellow townsmen. We waited at the door for a few minutes. I crowded in while Uncle Peabody stood talking to a villager. The Senator caught sight of me and came to my side and put his hand on my head and said:

"Hello, Bart! How you've grown! and how handsome you look! Where's your uncle?"

"He's there by the door," I answered.

"Well, let's go and see him."

Mr. Wright was stouter and grayer and grander than when I had seen him last. He was dressed in black broadcloth and wore a big beaver hat and high collar and his hair was almost white. I remember vividly his clear, kindly, gray eyes and ruddy cheeks.

"Baynes, I'm glad to see you," he said heartily. "Did ye bring me any jerked meat?"

"Didn't think of it," said Uncle Peabody. "But I've got a piece young doe all jerked an' if you're fond o' jerk I'll bring ye down some to-morrow."

"I'd like to take some to Washington, but I wouldn't have you bring it so far."

"I'd like to bring it—I want a chance to talk with ye for half an hour or such a matter," said my uncle. "I've got a little trouble on my hands."

The Senator took us into his office and introduced us to the leading men of the county.

"Here," said the Senator as he put his hand on my head, "is a coming man in the Democratic party."

The great men laughed at my blushes and we came away with a deep sense of pride in us. At last I felt equal to the ordeal of meeting the Dunkelbergs. My uncle must have shared my feeling, for, to my delight, he went straight to the basement store above which was the modest sign: "H. Dunkelberg, Produce."

"Well I swan!" said the merchant in the treble voice which I remembered so well. "This is Bart and Peabody! How are you?"

"Pretty well," I answered, my uncle being too slow of speech to suit my sense of propriety. "How is Sally?"

The two men laughed heartily, much to my embarrassment.

"He's getting right down to business," said my uncle.

"That's right," said Mr. Dunkelberg. "Why, Bart, she's sly as a cricket and pretty as a picture. Come up to dinner with me and see for yourself."

Uncle Peabody hesitated, whereupon I gave him a furtive nod and he said "All right," and then I had a delicious feeling of excitement. I had hard work to control my impatience when they talked.

By and by I asked, "Are you 'most ready to go?"

"Yes—come on—it's after twelve o'clock," said Mr. Dunkelberg. "Sally will be back from school now."

So we walked to the big house of the Dunkelbergs and I could hear my heart beating when we turned in at the gate—the golden gate of my youth it must have been, for after I had passed it I thought no more as a child.

That rude push which Mr. Grimshaw gave me had hurried the passing.

I was a little surprised at my own dignity when Sally opened the door to welcome us. My uncle told Aunt Deel that I acted and spoke like Silas Wright, "so nice and proper." Sally was different, too—less playful and more beautiful with long yellow curls covering her shoulders.

"How nice you look!" she said as she took my arm and led me into her playroom.

"These are my new clothes," I boasted. "They are very expensive and I have to be careful of them."

I behaved myself with great care at the table—I remember that—and, after dinner, we played in the doorway and the stable, I with a great fear of tearing my new clothes. I stopped and cautioned her more than once: "Be careful! For gracious sake! be careful o' my new suit!"

As we were leaving late in the afternoon she said:

"I wish you would come here to school."

"I suppose he will some time," said Uncle Peabody.

A new hope entered my breast, that moment, and began to grow there.

"Aren't you going to kiss her?" said Mr. Dunkelberg with a smile.

I saw the color in her cheeks deepen as she turned with a smile and walked away two or three steps while the grown people laughed, and stood with her back turned looking in at the window.

"You're looking the wrong way for the scenery," said Mr. Dunkelberg.

She turned and walked toward me with a look of resolution in her prettily face and said:

"I'm not afraid of him."

We kissed each other and, again, that well-remembered touch of her hair upon my face! But the feel of

her warm lips upon my own—that was so different and so sweet to remember in the lonely days that followed! Fast flows the river to the sea when youth is sailing on it. They had showed me out of the quiet cove into the swift current—those dear, kindly, thoughtless people. Sally ran away into the house as their laughter continued and my uncle and I walked down the street. How happy I was!

I observed with satisfaction that the village boys did not make fun of me when I passed them as they did when I wore the petticoat trousers. Mr. and Mrs. Wright came along with the crowd, by and by, and Colonel Medad Moody. We had supper with the Senator on the seat with us. He and my uncle began to talk about the

tightness of money and the banking laws and I remember a remark of my uncle, for there was that in his tone which I could never forget:

"We poor people are trusting you to look out for us—we poor people are trusting you to see that we get treated fair. We're havin' a hard time."

My uncle told him about the note and the visit of Mr. Grimshaw and of his threats and upbraidings.

"Did he say that in Bart's hearing?" asked the Senator.

"Ayes!—right out plain."

"Too bad! I'm going to tell you frankly, Baynes, that the best thing I know about you is your conduct toward this boy. I like it. The next best thing is the fact that you signed the note. It was bad business but it was good Christian conduct to help your friend. Don't regret it. You were poor and of an age when the boy's pranks were troublesome to both of you, but you took him in. I'll lend you the interest and try to get another holder for the mortgage on one condition. You must let me attend to Bart's schooling. I want to be boss about that. We have a great schoolmaster in Canton and when Bart is a little older I want him to go there to school. I'll try to find him a place where he can work for his board."

"We'll miss Bart but we'll be tickled to death—there's no two ways about that," said Uncle Peabody.

The Senator tested my arithmetic and grammar and geography as we rode along in the darkness and said by and by:

"You'll have to work hard, Bart. You'll have to take your book into the field as I did. After every row of corn I learned a rule of syntax or arithmetic or a fact in geography while I rested, and my thought and memory took hold of it as I plied the hoe. I don't want you to stop the reading, but from now on you must spend half of every evening on your lessons."

As I was going to bed the Senator called me to him and said:

"I shall be gone when you are up in the morning. It may be a long time before I see you; I shall leave something for you in a sealed envelope with your name on it. You are not to open the envelope until you go away to school. I know how you will feel that first day. When night falls you will think of your aunt and uncle and be very lonely. When you go to your room for the night I want you to sit down all by yourself and open the envelope and read what I shall write. They will be, I think, the most impressive words you ever read. You will think them over but you will not understand them for a long time. Ask every wise man you meet

to explain them to you, for all your happiness will depend upon your understanding of those few words in the envelope."

In the morning Aunt Deel put it in my hands.

"I wonder what in the world he wrote there—ayes!" said she. "We must keep it careful—ayes!—I'll put it in my trunk an' give it to ye when ye go to Canton to school."

"Has Mr. Wright gone?" I asked rather sadly.

"Ayes! Land o' mercy! He went away long before daylight with a lot o' jerked meat in a pack basket—ayes! Yer uncle is goin' down to the village to see 'bout the mortgage this afternoon, ayes!"

It was a Saturday and I spent its hours cording wood in the shed, pausing now and then for a look into my grammar.

What a day it was!—the first of many like it. I never think of those days without saying to myself: "What a God's blessing a man like Silas Wright can be in the community in which his heart and soul are as an open book!"

As the evening came on I took a long look at my cords. The shed was nearly half full of them. Four rules of syntax, also, had been carefully stored away in my brain. I said them over as I hurried down into the pasture with old Shep and brought in the cows. I got through milking just as Uncle Peabody came. I saw with joy that his face was cheerful.

"Yip!" he shouted as he stopped his team at the barn door, where Aunt Deel and I were standing. "We ain't got much to worry about now. I've got the interest money right here in my pocket!"

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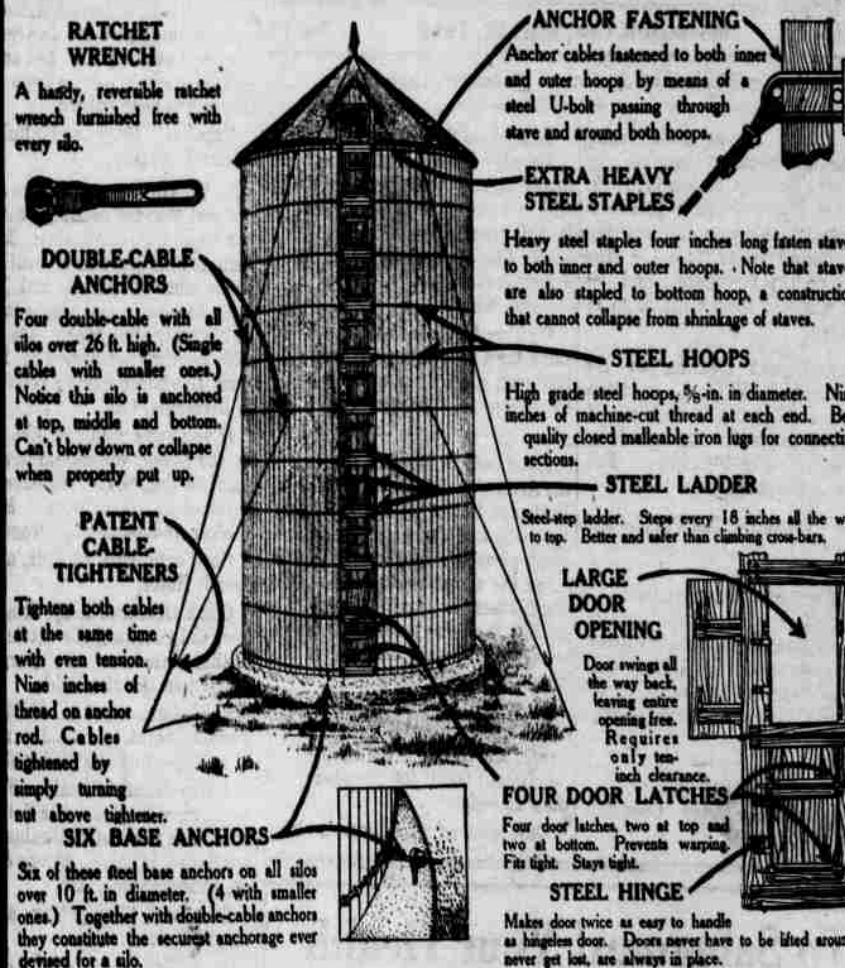


"I'm Not Afraid of Him."

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