

THE LIGHT IN THE CLEARING

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

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

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

CHAPTER I—Barton Baynes, orphan, taken to live with his uncle, Peabody Baynes, and his Aunt Deel on a farm on Hallybeen in a neighborhood called Lickitysplit 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 Roving Kate, known in the neighborhood as the "Blind Woman." Amos Grimshaw, young son of the richest man in the township, is a visitor at the Baynes home, and Roving Kate tells the fortunes of the two boys, predicting a bright future for Barton and death on the gallows for Amos. Roving Kate, 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.

CHAPTER V—When Barton is twelve years old he becomes aware of the existence of a wonderful and mysterious power known as "Money," and learns how, through his possession of that wonderful thing Grimshaw is the most powerful and greatly dreaded man in the community, most of the settlers being in his debt. After a visit to the Baynes home Mr. Wright leaves a note in a sealed envelope, which Barton is to read on the first night when he leaves home to attend school.

CHAPTER VI—Barton is asked to drive a load to mill, arrives safely, but in a snowstorm, unable to see the road, the horse gets into the ditch and a wheel of the wagon is broken. Uncle Peabody manages to get together enough to satisfy Grimshaw and obtain an extension.

CHAPTER VII—Now in his sixteenth year Barton accompanies "Mr. Purvis," the hired man, to the postoffice at Canton. On the way they meet a rider, and the three journey together. They are held up by a man with a gun, who makes the highwayman's demand of "Your money or your life." Purvis runs away, while the stranger draws a pistol, but before he can use it the robber shoots and kills him. Barton's horse throws him and runs away. As the murderer bends over the stranger Barton throws a stone which he observes wounds the thief, who makes off at once, but not until Barton had noted that his gun stock was broken in a peculiar manner. Search of the neighborhood for the robber is unavailing and the stranger is buried.

I could not remember that I had ever been "introduced" to anybody. I knew that people put their wits on exhibition and often flung down a "snag" by way of demonstrating their fitness for the honor, when they were introduced in books. I remember asking rather timidly:

"What shall I say when—when you—introduce me?"

"Oh, say anything you want to say," he answered with a look of amusement.

"I'm kind o' scared," I said.

"You needn't be—he was once a poor boy just like you."

"Just like me!" I repeated thoughtfully, for while I had heard a good deal of that kind of thing in our home, it had not, somehow, got under my jacket, as they used to say.

"Just like you—cowhide and all—the son of a small freeholder in Kinderhook on the Hudson," he went on. "But he was well fed in brain and body and kept his heart clean. So of course he grew and is still growing. That's a curious thing about men and women, Bart. If they are in good ground and properly cared for they never stop growing—never!—and that's a pretty full word—isn't it?"

We had come in sight of the house. I lagged behind a little when I saw the great man sitting on the small piazza with Mrs. Wright. I see vividly, as I write, the full figure, the ruddy, kindly face, the large nose, the gray eyes, the thick hair of silvered hair extending from his collar to the bald top of his head. He rose and said in a deep voice:

"He sows ill luck who hinders the reaper."

Mr. Wright hung his sickle on a small tree in the dooryard and answered:

"The plowman has overtaken the reaper, Mr. President. I bid you welcome to my humble home."

"It is a pleasure to be here and a regret to call you back to Washington," said the president as they shook

hands.

"I suppose that means an extra session," the senator answered.

"First let me reassure you. I shall get away as soon as possible, for I know that a president is a heavy burden for one to have on his hands."

"Don't worry. I can get along with almost any kind of a human being, especially if he like pudding and milk as well as you do," said the senator, who then introduced me in these words:

"Mr. President, this is my young friend, Barton Baynes, of the neighborhood of Lickitysplit in the town of Hallybeen—a coming man of this country."

"Come on," was the playful remark of the president as he took my hand. "I shall be looking for you."

I had carefully chosen my words and I remember saying, with some dignity, like one in a story book, although with a trembling voice:

"It is an honor to meet you, sir, and



"It is an honor to meet you, sir, and thank you for the right to vote—when I am old enough."

Vividly, too, I remember his gentle smile as he looked down at me and said in a most kindly tone:

"I think it a great honor to hear you say that."

He put his hands upon my shoulders and turning to the senator said:

"Wright, I often wish that I had your modesty."

"I need it much more than you do," the senator laughed.

Straightway I left them with an awkward bow and blushing to the roots of my hair.

As I neared the home of Mr. Hackett I heard hurrying footsteps behind me and the voice of Sally calling my name. I stopped and faced about.

How charming she looked as she walked toward me! I had never seen her quite so fixed up.

"Bart," she said. "I suppose you're not going to speak to me."

"If you'll speak to me," I answered.

"I love to speak to you," she said.

"I've been looking all around for you. Mother wants you to come over to dinner with us at just twelve o'clock. You're going away with father as soon as we get through."

I wanted to go but got the notion all at once that the Dunkelbergs were in need of information about me and that the time had come to impart it. So then and there that ancient Olympus of our family received notice as it were.

"I can't," I said. "I've got to study my lessons before I go away with your father."

It was a blow to her. I saw the shadow that fell upon her face. She was vexed and turned and ran away from me without another word and I felt a pang of regret as I went to the lonely and deserted home of the schoolmaster.

At twelve-thirty Mr. Dunkelberg came for me, with a high-stepping horse in a new harness and a shiny, still-running buggy. He wore gloves and a beaver hat and sat very erect and had little to say.

"I hear you met the president," he remarked.

"Yes, sir. I was introduced to him this morning," I answered a bit too proudly, and wondering how he had heard of my good fortune, but deeply gratified at his knowledge of it.

"What did he have to say?"

I described the interview and the looks of the great man. Not much more was said as we sped away toward the deep woods and the high hills.

I was eager to get home but wondered why he should be going with me to talk with Mr. Grimshaw and my uncle. Of course I suspected that it had to do with Amos, but how I knew not. He hummed in the rough going and thoughtfully flicked the bushes with his whip. I never knew a more persistent hummer.

Aunt Deel shook hands with Mr. Dunkelberg and then came to me and said:

"Wal, Bart Baynes! I never was so glad to see anybody in all the days o' my life—ayes! We been lookin' up the road for an hour—eyes! You come right into the house this minute—both o' you."

The table was spread with the things I enjoyed most—big, brown biscuits and a great comb of honey surrounded with its nectar and a pitcher of milk and a plate of cheese and some jerked meat and an apple pie.

"Set right down an' eat—I just

want to see ye eat—ayes I do!"

Mr. Grimshaw came soon after. He had finished our luncheon. He hitched his horse at the post and came in.

"Good day," he said, once and for all, as he came in at the open door. "Baynes, I want to have a talk with you and the boy. Tell me what you know about that murder."

"Wal, I had some business over to Pittsburg," my uncle began. "While I was there I thought I'd go and see Amos. So I drove out to Beekman's farm. They told me that Amos had left there after workin' four days. They gave him fourteen shillins an' he was goin' to take the stage in the mornin'."

He left some time in the night an' took Beekman's rifle with him, so they said. There was a piece o' wood broke out o' the stock o' the rifle. That was the kind o' gun that was used in the murder."

It surprised me that my uncle knew all this. He had said nothing to me of his journey or its result.

"How do you know?" snapped Mr. Grimshaw.

"This boy see it plain. It was a gun with a piece o' wood broke out o' the stock."

"Is that so?" was the brusque demand of the money lender as he turned to me.

"Yes, sir," I answered.

"The boy lies," he snapped, and turning to my uncle added: "Yer mad 'cause I'm tryin' to make ye pay yer honest debts—ain't ye now?"

Uncle Peabody, keeping his temper, shook his head and calmly said: "No, I ain't anything ag'in' you or Amos, but it's got to be so that a man can travel the roads o' this town without gettin' his head blowed off."

Mr. Dunkelberg turned to me and asked:

"Are you sure that the stock of the gun you saw was broken?"

"Yes, sir—and I'm almost sure I was Amos that ran away with it."

"Why?"

"I picked up a stone and threw it at him and it grazed the left side of his face, and the other night I saw the scar it made."

My aunt and uncle and Mr. Dunkelberg moved with astonishment as I spoke of the scar. Mr. Grimshaw, with keen eyes fixed upon me, gave a little grunt of incredulity.

"Huh!—Liar!" he muttered.

"I am not a liar," I declared with indignation, whereupon my aunt angrily stirred the fire in the stove and Uncle Peabody put his hand on my arm and said:

"Hush, Bart! Keep your temper, son."

"If you tell these things you may be the means of sending an innocent boy to his death," Mr. Dunkelberg said

to me. "I wouldn't be too sure about 'em if I were you. It's so easy to be mistaken. You couldn't be sure in the dusk that the stone really hit him, could you?"

I answered: "Yes, sir—I saw the stone hit and I saw him put his hand on the place while he was running. I guess it hurt him some."

"Look a' here, Baynes," Mr. Grimshaw began in that familiar scolding tone of his, "I know what you want an' we might jest as well git right down to business first as last. You keep this boy still an' I'll give ye five years' interest."

Aunt Deel gave a gasp and quickly covered her mouth with her hand. Uncle Peabody changed color as he rose from his chair with a strange look on his face. He swung his big right hand in the air as he said:

"By the eternal jumpin'—"

He stopped, pulled down the left sleeve of his flannel shirt and walked to the water pail and drank out of the dipper.

"Say, Mr. Grimshaw, I'm awful sorry for ye," said my uncle as he returned to his chair, "but I've always learnt this boy to tell the truth an' the bull truth. I know the danger I'm in. We're gettin' old. It'll be hard to start over ag'in' an' you can ruin us if ye want to an' I'm as scared o' ye as a mouse in a cat's paw, but this boy has got to tell the truth right out plain. I couldn't muzzle him if I tried—he's too much of a man. If you're scared o' the truth you must know that Amos is guilty."

Mr. Grimshaw shook his head with anger and beat the floor with the end of his cane.

Continued next week

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