

The Light in the Clearing

A Tale of the North Country in the Time of Silas Wright

By IRVING BACHELLER

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CHAPTER XI.

The Spirit of Michael Henry and Others.

At the examination of Amos Grimshaw my knowledge was committed to the records and ceased to be a source of danger to me. Grimshaw came to the village that day. On my way to the courtroom I saw him walking slowly, with bent head as I had seen him before, followed by old Kate. She carried her staff in her left hand while the forefinger of her right hand was pointing him out. Silent as a ghost and as unheeded—one would say—she followed his steps.

I observed that old Kate sat on a front seat with her hand to her ear and Grimshaw beside his lawyer at a big table and that when she looked at him her lips moved in a strange unuttered whisper of her spirit. Her face filled with joy as one damning detail after another came out in the evidence.

The facts hereinbefore alleged, and others, were proved, for the tracks fitted the shoes of Amos. The young man was held and presently indicted. The time of his trial was not determined.

I wrote a good hand those days and the leading merchant of the village engaged me to post his books every Saturday at ten cents an hour. Thereafter until Christmas I gave my free days to that task. I estimated the sum that I should earn and planned to divide it in equal parts and proudly present it to my aunt and uncle on Christmas day.

One Saturday while I was at work on the big ledger of the merchant I ran upon this item:

October 1.—R. Wright—To one suit of clothes for Michael Henry from measures furnished by R. Robinson
Shirts to match \$14.50

I knew then the history of the suit of clothes which I had worn since that rainy October night, for I remembered that Sam Robinson, the tailor, had measured me at our house and made up the cloth of Aunt Deel's weaving.

I observed, also, that numerous articles—a load of wood, two sacks of flour, three pairs of boots, one coat, ten pounds of salt pork and four bushels of potatoes—all for "Michael Henry"—had been charged to Silas Wright.

So by the merest chance I learned that the invisible "Michael Henry" was the almoner of the modest statesman and really the spirit of Silas Wright feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and warming the cold house, in the absence of its owner. It was the heart of Wright joined to that of the schoolmaster, which sat in the green chair.

I fear that my work suffered a moment's interruption, for just then I began to know the great heart of the senator. Its warmth was in the clothing that covered my back, its delicacy in the ignorance of those who had shared its benefactions.

I count this one of the great events of my youth. But there was a greater one, although it seemed not so at the time of it. A traveler on the road to Ballybeen had dropped his pocketbook containing a large amount of money—\$2,700 was the sum, if I remember rightly. He was a man who, being justly suspicious of the banks, had withdrawn his money. Posters announced the loss and the offer of a large reward. The village was profoundly stirred by them. Searching parties went up the road stirring its dust and groping in its grass and briars for the great prize which was supposed to be lying there. It was said, however, that the quest had been unsuccessful. So the lost pocketbook became a treasured mystery of the village and of all the hills and valleys toward Ballybeen—a topic of old wives and gabbling husbands at the fireside for unnumbered years.

By and by the fall term of school ended. Uncle Peabody came down to get me the day before Christmas. I had enjoyed my work and my life at the Hackets', on the whole, but I was glad to be going home again. My uncle was in high spirits and there were many packages in the sleigh.

"A merry Christmas to ye both an' may the Lord love ye!" said Mr. Hackett as he bade us goodbye. "Every day our thoughts will be going up the hills to your house."

The bells rang merrily as we hurried

through the swamp in the narrow snow paths.

"We're goin' to move," said my uncle presently. "We've agreed to get out by the middle o' May."

"How does that happen?" I asked.

"I settled with Grimshaw and agreed to go. If it hadn't 'a' been for Wright and Baldwin we wouldn't 'a' got a cent. They threatened to bid against him at the sale. So he settled. We're goin' to have a new home. We've bought a hundred an' fifty acres from Abe Leonard. Goin' to build a new house in the spring. It will be nearer the village."

He playfully nudged my ribs with his elbow.

"We've had a little good luck, Bart," he went on. "I'll tell ye what it is if you won't say anything about it."

I promised.

"I dunno as it would matter much," he continued, "but I don't want to do any braggin'. It ain't anybody's business, anyway. An old uncle over in Vermont died three weeks ago and left us thirty-eight hundred dollars. It was old Uncle Ezra Baynes o' Hinesburg. Died without a chick or child. Your aunt and me slipped down to Potsdam an' took the stage an' went over an' got the money. It was more money than I ever see before in my life. We put it in the bank in Potsdam to keep it out o' Grimshaw's hands. I wouldn't trust that man as far as you could throw a bull by the tail."

It was a cold, clear night, and when we reached home the new stove was snapping with the heat in its firebox and the pudding puffing in the pot and old Shep dreaming in the chimney corner. Aunt Deel gave me a hug at my shoulders.

"Why, Bart! You're growin' like a weed—ain't ye?—ays ye be," my aunt said as she stood and looked at me. "Set right down here an' warm ye—ays—I've done all the chores—ays!"

How warm and comfortable was the dear old room with those beloved faces in it. I wonder if paradise itself can seem more pleasant to me. I have had the best food this world can provide. In my time, but never anything that I ate with a keener relish than the pudding and milk and bread and butter and cheese and pumpkin pie which Aunt Deel gave us that night.

Supper over, I wiped the dishes for my aunt while Uncle Peabody went out to feed and water the horses. Then we sat down in the genial warmth while I told the story of my life in "the busy town," as they called it. What pride and attention they gave me then!

My fine clothes and the story of how I had come by them taxed my ingenuity somewhat, although not improperly. I had to be careful not to let them know that I had been ashamed of the homemade suit. They somehow felt the truth about it and a little silence followed the story. Then Aunt Deel drew her chair near me and touched my hair very gently and looked into my face without speaking.

"Ayes! I know," she said presently, in a kind of caressing tone, with a touch of sadness in it. "They ain't used to coarse homespun stuff down there in the village. They made fun o' ye—didn't they, Bart?"

"I don't care about that," I assured them. "The mind's the measure of the man," I quoted, remembering the lines the Senator had repeated to me.

"That's sound!" Uncle Peabody exclaimed with enthusiasm.

Aunt Deel took my hand in hers and surveyed it thoughtfully for a moment without speaking.

"You ain't goin' to have to suffer that way no more," she said in a low tone. "We're goin' to be more comfortable—ays. Yer uncle thought we better go West, but I couldn't bear to go off so fur an' leave mother an' father an' sister Susan an' all the folks we loved layin' here in the ground alone—I want to lay down with 'em by an' by an' wait for the sound o' the trumpet—ays!—mebbe it'll be for thousands o' years—ays!"

To our astonishment the clock struck twelve.

"Hurrah! It's merry Christmas!" said Uncle Peabody as he jumped to his feet and began to sing of the little Lord Jesus.

We joined him while he stood beating time with his right hand after the fashion of a singing master.

"Off with yer boots, friend!" he exclaimed when the stanza was finished. "We don't have to set up and watch like the shepherds."

We drew our boots on the chair round with hands clasped over the knee—how familiar is the process, and yet I haven't seen it in more than half a century! I lighted a candle and scampered upstairs in my stocking feet. Uncle Peabody following close and slapping my thigh as if my pace were not fast enough for him. In the midst of our skylarking the candle tumbled to the floor and I had to go back to the stove and relight it.

How good it seemed to be back in the old room under the shingles! The heat of the stovepipe had warmed its hospitality.

"It's been kind o' lonesome here," said Uncle Peabody as he opened the window. "I always let the wind come in to keep me company—it gits so warm."

"Ye can't look at yer stockin' yet," said Aunt Deel when I came downstairs about eight o'clock, having slept through chore time. I remember it was the delicious aroma of frying ham and buckwheat cakes which awoke me; and who wouldn't rise and shake off the cloak of slumber on a bright, cold winter morning with such provocation?

Continued next week



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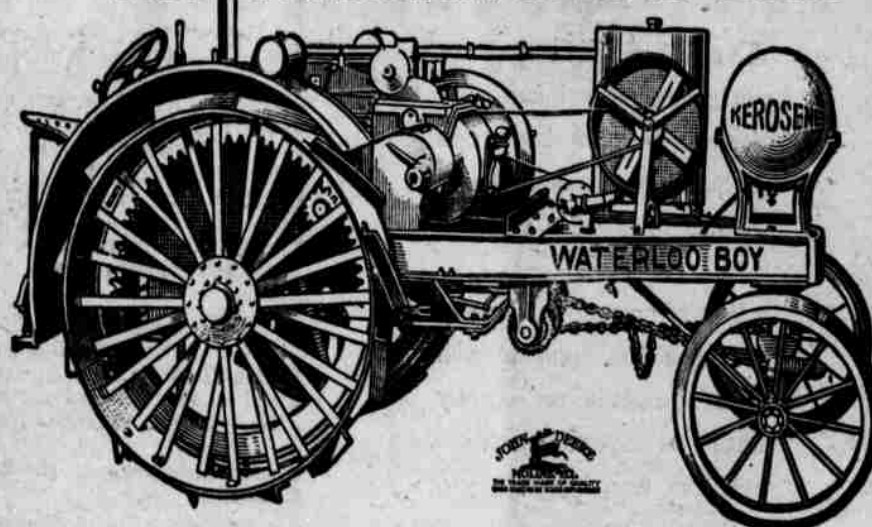
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