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The Light in the Clearing

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

By
IRVING BACHELLER
Author of "Eben Holden," "Dyl and L," "Darryl of the Blessed Isles," "Keeping Up With Lizzie," Etc., Etc.

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"Merry Christmas!" we all shouted. She smiled and nodded her head and sat down in the chair which Uncle Peabody had placed for her at the stove side. Aunt Deel took the cloud off her head while Kate drew her mittens—newly knitted of the best yarn. Then my aunt brought some stockings and a shawl from the tree and laid them on the lap of old Kate. What a silence fell upon us as we saw tears coursing down the cheeks of this lonely old woman of the countryside—tears of joy, doubtless, for God knows how long it had been since the poor, abandoned soul had seen a merry Christmas and shared its kindness. I did not fail to observe how clean her face and hands looked! She was greatly changed.

She took my hand as I went to her side and tenderly caressed it. A gentler smile came to her face than ever I had seen upon it. The old stern look returned for a moment as she held one finger aloft in a gesture which only I and my Aunt Deel understood. We knew it signified a peril and a mystery. That I should have to meet it, somewhere up the hidden pathway, I had no doubt whatever.

"Dinner's ready!" exclaimed the cheerful voice of Aunt Deel.

Then what a stirring of chairs and feet as we sat down at the table. Old Kate sat by the side of my aunt and we were all surprised at her good manners.

We jested and laughed and drank elder and reviewed the year's history and ate as only they may eat who have big bones and muscles and the vitality of oxen. I never taste the flavor of sage and currant jelly or hear a hearty laugh without thinking of those holiday dinners in the old log house on Rattleroad.

That Christmas brought me nothing better than those words, the memory of which is one of the tallest towers in that long avenue of my past down which I have been looking these many days. About all you can do for a boy, worth while, is to give him something good to remember.

The day had turned dark. The temperature had risen and the air was dank and chilly. The men began to hitch up their horses.

So, one by one, the sleighloads left us with cheery good-bys and a grinding of runners and a jingling of bells. When the last had gone Uncle Peabody and I went into the house. Aunt Deel sat by the stove, old Kate by the window looking out at the falling dusk. How still the house seemed!

"There's one thing I forgot," I said as I proudly took out of my wallet the six one-dollar bills which I had earned by working Saturdays and handed three of them to my aunt and three to my uncle, saying:

"That is my Christmas present to you. I earned it myself."

I remember so well their astonishment and the trembling of their hands and the look of their faces.

"It's grand—aye!" Aunt Deel said in a low tone.

She rose in a moment and beckoned to me and my uncle. We followed her through the open door to the other room.

"I'll tell ye what I'd do," she whispered. "I'd give 'em to ol' Kate—aye! She's goin' to stay with us till tomorrow."

"Good idee!" said Uncle Peabody. So I took the money out of their hands and went in and gave it to the Silent Woman.

"That's your present from me," I said.

How can I forget how she held my arm against her with that loving, familiar, rocking motion of a woman who is soothing a baby at her breast and kissed my coat sleeve? She released my arm and, turning to the window, leaned her head upon its sill and shook with sobs. The dusk had thickened. As I returned to my seat by the stove I could dimly see her form against the light of the window. We sat in silence for a little while.

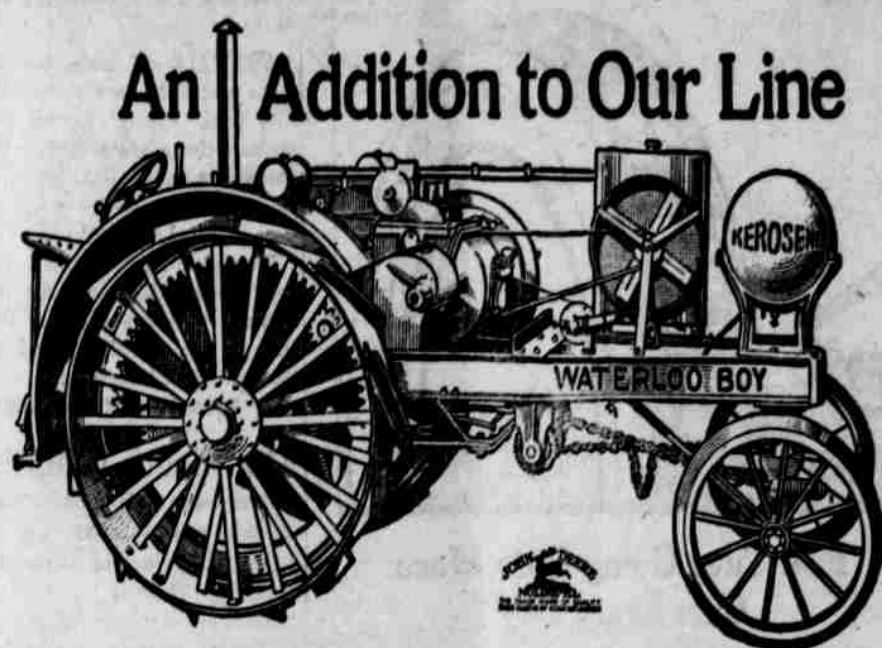
Then Uncle Peabody rose and got a candle and lighted it at the hearth.

I held the lantern while Uncle Peabody fed the sheep and the two cows and milked—a slight chore these winter days.

"You and I are to go off to bed purty early," he said as we were going back to the house. "Yer Aunt Deel wants to see Kate alone and git her to talk if she can."

"I dunno but she'll swing back into this world ag'in," said Uncle Peabody when we had gone up to our little room. "I guess all she needs is to be treated like a human bein'. Yer Aunt Deel an' I couldn't git over thinkin' o' what she done for you that night in the ol' barn. So I took some o' yer aunt's good clothes to her an' a pair o' boots an' asked her to come to Christmas. She lives in a little room over the blacksmith shop down to Butterfield's mill. I told her I'd come after her with the cutter but she shook her head. I knew she'd rather walk."

He was yawning as he spoke and



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soon we were both asleep under the shingles.

CHAPTER XII.

The Thing and Other Things.

I returned to Mr. Hackett's house late in the afternoon of New Year's day. The schoolmaster was lying on a big lounge in a corner of their front room with the children about him. The dusk was falling.

"Welcome, my liddle buck!" he exclaimed as I entered. "We're telling stories o' the old year an' you're just in time for the last o' them. Sit down, lad, and God give ye patience! It'll soon be over."

After supper he got out his boxing gloves and gave me a lesson in the art of self-defense, in which, I was soon to learn, he was highly accomplished, for we had a few rounds together every day after that. He keenly enjoyed this form of exercise and I soon began to. My capacity for taking punishment without flinching grew apace and before long I got the knack of countering and that pleased him more even than my work in school, I have sometimes thought.

"God bless ye, boy!" he exclaimed one day after I had landed heavily on his cheek, "ye've a nice way o' sneakin' in with yer right. I've a notion ye may find it useful some day."

I wondered a little why he should say that, and while I was wondering he felled me with a stinging blow on my nose.

"Ah, my lad—there's the best thing I have seen ye do—got up an' come back with no mad in ye," he said as he gave me his hand.

One day the schoolmaster called the older boys to the front seats in his room and I among them.

"Now, boys, I'm going to ask ye what ye want to do in the world," he said. "Don't be afraid to tell me what ye may never have told before and I'll do what I can to help ye."

Continued next week

On Old Accounts

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