

The Light in the Clearing

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

By IRVING BACHELLER

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Next morning I went down into the main street of the village before leaving for home. I wanted to see how it looked and, to be quite frank, I wanted some of the people of Canton to see how I looked, for my clothes were of the best cloth and cut in the latest fashion. Many stopped me and shook my hand—men and women who had never noticed me before, but there was a quality in their smiles that I didn't quite enjoy. I know now that they thought me a little too grand on the outside. What a stern-souled lot those Yankees were! "All ain't gold that glitters." How often I had heard that version of the old motto!

"Why, you look like the senator when he is just gittin' home from the capital," said Mr. Jenison.

They were not yet willing to take me at the par of my appearance.

I met Betsy Price—one of my school-mates—on the street. She was very cordial and told me that the Dunkelbergs had gone to Saratoga.

"I got a letter from Sally this mornin'," Betsy went on. "She said that young Mr. Latour was at the same hotel and that he and her father were good friends."

I wonder if she really enjoyed sticking this thorn into my flesh—a thorn which made it difficult for me to follow the advice of the schoolmaster and robbed me of the little peace I might have enjoyed. My faith in Sally wavered up and down until it settled at its wonted level and reassured me.

It was a perfect summer morning and I enjoyed my walk over the familiar road and up into the hill country. The birds seemed to sing a welcome to me. Men and boys I had known waved their hats in the hayfields and looked at me. There are few pleasures in this world like that of a boy getting home after a long absence.

My heart beat fast when I saw the house and my uncle and Purvis coming in from the twenty-acre lot with a load of hay. Aunt Deel stood on the front steps looking down the road. Now and then her waving handkerchief went to her eyes. Uncle Peabody came down the standard off his load and walked toward me.

"Say, stranger, have you seen anything of a feller by the name of Bart Baynes?" he demanded.

"Have you?" I asked.

"No, sir, I ain't. Gosh a'mighty! Say! what have ye done with that boy of our'n?"

"What have you done to our house?" I asked again.

"Bullt on an addition."

"That's what I've done to your boy," I answered.

"Thunder an' lightning! How you've raised the roof!" he exclaimed as he

grabbed my satchel. Dressed like a statesman an' bigger'n a bullmoose, I can't rattle with you no more. But, say, I'll run ye a race. I can beat ye an' carry the satchel, too."

We ran pell-mell up the lane to the steps like a pair of children.

Aunt Deel did not speak. She just put her arms around me and laid her dear old head upon my breast. Uncle Peabody turned away. Then what a silence! Off in the edge of the woodland I heard the fairy flute of a wood-thrush.

"Purvis, you drive that load on the floor an' put up the horses," Uncle Peabody shouted in a moment. "If you don't like it you can hire 'nother man. I won't do no more till after dinner. This slave business is played out."

"All right," Purvis answered.

"You bet it's all right. I'm fer abo-

lition an' I've stood your comin'—a nigger-driver ways long enough fer one mornin'. If you don't like it you can look for 'nother man."

Aunt Deel and I began to laugh at this good-natured, make-believe scolding of Uncle Peabody and the emotional strain was over. They led me into the house, where a delightful surprise awaited me, for the rooms had been decorated with balsam boughs and sweet ferns. A glowing mass of violets, framed in moss, occupied the center of the table. The house was filled with the odors of the forest, which, as they knew, were dear to me. I had written that they might expect me some time before noon, but I begged them not to meet me in Canton, as I wished to walk home after my long ride. So they were ready for me.

I remember how they felt the cloth on my back and how proudly they surveyed it.

"Couldn't buy them goods 'round these parts," said Uncle Peabody. "Nor nothin' like 'em—no, str."

"Feels a leetle bit like the butternut trousers," said Aunt Deel as she felt my coat.

"Ayes, but them butternut trousers ain't what they used to be when they was young and limber," Uncle Peabody remarked. "Seems so they was gettin' the kind o' wrinkled an' baldheaded-like, 'specially where I set down."

"Ayes! Wal I guess a man can't grow old without his pants growin' old, too—ayes!" said Aunt Deel.

"If yer legs are in 'em ev'ry Sunday they ketch it of ye," my uncle answered. "Long sermons are hard on pants, seems to me."

"An' the longer the legs the harder the sermons—in them little seats over 't the schoolhouse—ayes!" Aunt Deel added by way of justifying his complaint. "There wouldn't be so much wear in a ten-mile walk—no!"

The chicken pie was baking and the strawberries were ready for the short-cake.

"I've been wallerin' since the dew was off gittin' them berries an' v'lets—ayes!" said Aunt Deel, now busy with her work at the stove.

"Aunt, you look as young as ever," I remarked.

She slapped my arm and said with mock severity:

"Stop that! Why! You know better—ayes!"

How vigorously she stirred the fire then.

"I can't return the compliment—my soul! how you've changed—ayes!" she remarked.

"I hope you ain't fit no more, Bart. I can't bear to think o' you flyin' at folks an' poundin' of 'em. Don't seem right—no, it don't!"

"Why, Aunt Deel, what in the world do you mean?" I asked.

"It's Purvis' brain that does the poundin', I guess," said my uncle. "It's kind o' got the habit. It's a regular beetle brain. To hear him talk ye'd think he an' you could clean out the hull Mexican nation—barrin' accidents. Why, anybody would suppose that yer enemies go to climbin' trees as soon as they see ye comin' an' that you pull the trees up by the roots to git at 'em."

"A certain amount of such devilry is necessary to the comfort of Mr. Purvis," I remarked. "If there is nobody else to take the responsibility for it he assumes it himself. His imagination has an intense craving for blood and violence. It's that type of American who, egged on by the slave power, is hurrying us into trouble with Mexico."

Purvis came in presently with a look in his face which betrayed his knowledge of the fact that all the cobwebs spun by his fancy were now to be brushed away. Still he enjoyed them while they lasted and there was a kind of tacit claim in his manner that they were subjects regarding which no honest man could be expected to tell the truth.

As we ate our dinner they told me that an escaped slave had come into a neighboring county and excited the people with stories of the auction block and of negroes driven like yoked oxen on plantations in South Carolina, whence he had escaped on a steamboat.

"I b'lieve I'm goin' to vote for abolition," said Uncle Peabody. "I wonder what Silas Wright will say to that."

"He'll probably advise against it; the time isn't ripe for so great a change," was my answer. "He thinks that the whole matter should be left to the glacial action of time's forces."

Indeed I had spoken the view of the sounder men of the North. The subject filled them with dread alarm. But the attitude of Uncle Peabody was significant. The sentiment in favor of a change was growing. It was now to be reckoned with, for the abolition party was said to hold the balance of power in New York and New England and was behaving itself like a bull in a china shop.

After dinner I tried to put on some of my old clothes, but found that my nakedness had so expanded that they would not cover it, so I hitched my white mare on the spring wagon and drove to the village for my trunk.

Every week day after that I worked in the fields until the senator arrived in Canton about the middle of August. On one of those happy days I received a letter from old Kate, dated, to my surprise, in Saratoga. It said:

"Dear Barton Baynes: I thought I would let you know that my father is dead. I have come home to rest and have found some work to do. I am better now. Have seen Sally. She is very beautiful and kind. She does not know that I am the old witch, I have changed so. The others do not know—it is better that way. I think it was the Lord that brought me here. He has a

way of taking care of some people, my boy. Do you remember when I began to call you my boy—you were very little. It is long, long ago since I first saw you in your father's doorway—you said you were going to mill on a butterfly's back. You looked just as I thought my boy would look. You gave me a kiss. What a wonderful gift it was to me then! I began to love you. I have no one else to think of now. I hope you won't mind my thinking so much of you."

"God bless you, "KATE FULLERTON."

I understood now why the strong will and singular insight of this woman had so often exercised themselves in my behalf. I could not remember the far day and the happy circumstance of which she spoke, but I wrote her a letter which must have warmed her heart I am sure.

Silas Wright arrived in Canton and drove up to our home. He reached our door at eight in the morning with his hound and rifle. He had aged rapidly since I had seen him last. His hair was almost white. There were many new lines in his face. He seemed more grave and dignified. He did not lapse into the dialect of his fathers when he spoke of the ancient pastimes of hunting and fishing as he had been wont to do.

"Bart," he said when the greetings were over, "let's you and me go and spend a day in the woods. I'll leave my man here to help your uncle while you're gone."

We went by driving south a few miles and tramping in to the foot of the stillwater on our river—a trail long familiar to me. The dog left us soon after we took it and began to range over thick wooded hills. We sat down among small, spiralkie spruces at the river's edge with a long stretch of water in sight while the music of the hound's voice came faintly to our ears from the distant forest.

"Oh, I've been dreaming of this for a long time," said the senator as he leaned back against a tree and filled his lungs and looked out upon the water, green with lily pads along the edge and flecked with the last of the white blossoms. "I believe you want to leave this lovely country."

"I am waiting for the call to go," I said.

"Well, I'm inclined to think you are the kind of man who ought to go," he answered almost sadly. "You are needed. I have been waiting until we should meet to congratulate you on your behavior at Cobleskill. I think you have the right spirit—that is the all-important matter. You will encounter strange company in the game of politics. Let me tell you a story!"

He told me many stories of his life in Washington, interrupted by a sound like that of approaching footsteps. We ceased talking and presently a flock of partridges came near us, pacing along over the mat of leaves in a leisurely fashion. We sat perfectly still. A young cock bird with his beautiful ruff standing out, like the hair on the back of a frightened dog, strode toward us with a comic threat in his manner. It seemed as if he were of half a mind to knock us into the river. But we sat as still as stumps and he spared us and went on with the others.

The baying of the hound was nearer now. Suddenly we saw a big buck come down to the shore of the cove near us and on our side of the stream. He looked to right and left. Then he made a long leap into the water and waded slowly until it covered him. He raised his nose and laid his antlers back over his shoulders and swam quietly downstream, his nose just showing above the water. His antlers were like a bit of driftwood. If we had not seen him take the water his antlers might easily have passed for a bunch of dead sticks. Soon the buck slowly lifted his head and turned his neck and looked at both shores. Then very deliberately he resumed his place under water and went on. We watched him as he took the farther shore below us and made off in the woods again.

"I couldn't shoot at him, it was such a beautiful bit of politics," said the senator.

Soon the hound reached the cove's edge and swam the river and ranged up and down the bank for half an hour before he found the buck's trail again.

"I've seen many a rascal, driven to water by the hounds, go swimming away as slyly as that buck, with their horns in the air, looking as innocent as a bit of driftwood. They come in from both shores—the Whig and the Democratic—and they are always shot at from one bank or the other."

I remember it surprised me a little to hear him say that they came in from both shores.

"Just what do you want to do?" he asked presently.

"I should like to go down to Washington with you and help you in any way that I can."

"All right, partner—we'll try it," he answered gravely. "I hope that I don't forget and work you as hard as I work myself. It wouldn't be decent. I have a great many letters to write. I'll try thinking out loud while you take them down in sound-hand. Then you can draft them neatly and I'll sign them. You have tact and good manners and can do many of my errands for me and save me from those who have no good reason for taking up my time."

"You will meet the best people and the worst. There's just a chance that it may come to something worth while—who knows? You are young yet. It will be good training and you will witness the making of some history now and then."

What elation I felt! Again the voice of the hound, which had been ringing in the distant hills,

was coming nearer.

"We must keep watch—another deer is coming," said the senator.

We had only a moment's watch before a fine yearling buck came down to the opposite shore and stood looking across the river. The senator raised his rifle and fired. The buck fell in the edge of the water.

"How shall we get him?" my friend asked.

"It will not be difficult," I answered as I began to undress. Nothing was difficult those days.

I swam the river and towed the buck across with a beech withe in his

gambrel joints. The hound joined me before I was half across with my burgen and nosed the carcass and swam on ahead yelping with delight.

We dressed the deer and then I had the great joy of carrying him on my back two miles across the country to the wagon. The senator wished to send a guide for the deer, but I insisted that the carrying was my privilege.

"Well, I guess your big thighs and broad shoulders can stand it," said he.

"My uncle has always said that no man could be called a hunter until he ran so into the woods without a guide

and kill a deer and bring it out on his back. I want to be able to testify that I am at least partly qualified."

"Your uncle didn't say anything about fetching the deer across a deep river without a boat, did he?" Mr. Wright asked me with a smile.

Leaves of the beeches, maples and basswoods—yellowed by frost—hung like tiny lanterns, glowing with noon-day light, above the dim forest aisle which we traveled.

The sun was down when we got to the clearing.

Continued next week



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