

# THE LIGHT IN THE CLEARING

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

By IRVING BACHELLER

AUTHOR OF  
"EVEN HOLDEN, D'RI AND I, DARREL OF THE BLESSED ISLES,  
KEEPING UP WITH LEZZIE, ETC., ETC."

### PREFACE

The Light in the Clearing shone upon many things and mostly upon those which, above all others, have impressed and perpetuated the Spirit of America and which, just now, seem to me to be worthy of attention. I believe that spirit to be the very same as the Lord which, in this dark and windy night of time, has flickered so that the souls of the faithful have been afraid. But let us be of good cheer. It is shining brighter as I write and, under God, I believe it shall, by and by, be seen and loved of all men.

One self-contained, Homeric figure, of the remote country-ide in which I was born, had the true Spirit of Democracy and about his light shined in the senate of the United States and the capitol at Albany. He carried the Candle of the Lord, it led him to a height of self-forgetfulness achieved by only two others—Washington and Lincoln. Yet I have been surprised by the profound and general ignorance of this generation regarding the career of Silas Wright.

The distinguished senator who served at his side for many years, Thomas H. Benton of Missouri, has this to say of Silas Wright in his Thirty Years' View: "His refusal of cabinet appointments under his fast friend Van Buren and under Polk, whom he may be said to have saved, is a story which never let them lie in telling the story."

He was, in fact, a human being, through and through, but so upright that they used to say of him that he was "as honest as any man under heaven or in it."

For my knowledge of the color and spirit of the time I am indebted to a long course of reading in its books, newspapers and periodicals, notably the North American Review, the United States Magazine and Democratic Review, the New York Mirror, the Knickerbocker, the St. Lawrence Republican, Benton's Thirty Years' View, Bancroft's Life of Martin Van Buren, histories of Wright and his time by Hammond and Jenkins, and to many manuscript letters of the distinguished commoner in the New York public library and in the possession of Mr. Samuel Wright of Weybridge, Vermont.

To any who may think that they discover portraits in these pages I desire to say that all the characters—save only Silas Wright and President Van Buren and Barton Baynes—are purely imaginary. However, there were Grimshaws and Purvises and Phillips and Aunt Deels and Uncle Peabody in almost every rustic neighborhood those days, and I regret to add that Roving Kate was on many roads. The case of Amos Grimshaw bears a striking resemblance to that of young Stanford, executed long ago in Maine for the particulars of which case I am indebted to my friend, Mr. H. L. Ives of Potsdam.

### THE AUTHOR.

### BOOK ONE

Which Is the Story of the Candle and the Compass.

### CHAPTER I.

#### The Melon Harvest.

Once upon a time I owned a watermelon. I say once because I never did it again. When I got through owning that melon I never wanted another. The time was 1831; I was a boy of seven and the melon was the first of all my harvests.

I didn't know much about myself those days except the fact that my name was Bart Baynes and, further, that I was an orphan who owned a watermelon and a little spotted hen and lived on Rattleroad in a neighborhood called Liktyappt. I lived with my Aunt Deel and my Uncle Peabody Baynes on a farm. They were brother and sister—he about thirty-eight and she a little beyond the farthest goal of forty.

My father and mother died in a scourge of diphtheria that swept the neighborhood when I was a boy of five. A few days after I awoke in the arms of my aunt and uncle I awoke to examine some white flowers on its top shelf and tipped the whole thing over, scattering its burden of alabaster, wax flowers and seashells on the floor. My aunt came running in her tiptoes and exclaimed: "Mercy! Come right out of here this minute—you pest!"

Minerva. When Aunt Deel returned to the kitchen where I sat—a sorrowing little refugee hunched up in a corner—she said: "I'll have to tell you Uncle Peabody—ayes!"

"Oh please don't tell my Uncle Peabody," I wailed.

"Ayes! I'll have to tell him," she answered firmly.

For the first time I looked for him with dread at the window and when he came I hid in a closet and heard that solemn and penetrating note in her voice as she said:

"I guess you'll have to take that boy away—ayes!"

"What now?" he asked.

"My stars! he sneaked into the parlor and tipped over the what-not and smashed that beautiful wax wreath!"

"Jerusalem four-corners!" he exclaimed. "I'll have to—"

head a kind of watermelon thump with the middle finger of her right hand and with a curious look in her eyes. Uncle Peabody used to call it a "snapping look." Almost always he whacked the bed with his slipper. There were exceptions, however, and, by and by, I came to know in each case the destination of the slipper, for if I had done anything which really afflicted my conscience that strip of leather seemed to know the truth, and found its way to my person.

Aunt Deel tolled incessantly. She washed and scrubbed and polished and dusted and sewed and knit from morning until night. She lived in mortal fear that company would come and find her unprepared—Alma Jones or Jabez Lincoln and his wife, or Ben and Mary Humphries, or "Mr. and Mrs. Horace Dunkelberg." These were the people of whom she talked when the neighbors came in and when she was not talking of the Bayneses. I observed that she always said "Mr. and Mrs. Horace Dunkelberg." They were the conversational ornaments of our home.

"As Mrs. Horace Dunkelberg says," or, "as I said to Mr. Horace Dunkelberg," were phrases calculated to establish our social standing. I supposed that the world was peopled by Joneses, Lincolns, Humphries and Dunkelbergs, but mostly by Dunkelbergs. These latter were very rich people who lived in Canton village.

I know, now, how dearly Aunt Deel loved her brother and me. I must have been a great trial to that woman of forty unused to the pranks of children and the tender offices of a mother. Naturally I turned from her to my Uncle Peabody as a refuge and a help in time of trouble, with increasing fondness. He had no knitting or sewing to do and when Uncle Peabody sat in the house he gave all his time to me and we weathered many a storm together as we sat silently in his favorite corner, of an evening, when I always went to sleep in his arms.

I was seven years old when Uncle Peabody gave me the watermelon seeds. I put one of them in my mouth and bit it.

"It appears to me there's an awful draft blowing down your throat," said Uncle Peabody. "You ain't no business eatin' a melon seed."

"Why?" was my query.

"'Cause it was made to put in the ground. Didn't you know it was alive?"

"Alive!" I exclaimed.

"Alive," said he. "I'll show ye." He put a number of the seeds in the ground and covered them, and said that part of the garden should be mine. I watched it every day and by and by two vines came up. One sickened and died in dry weather. Uncle Peabody said that I must water the other every day. I did it faithfully and the vine thrived.

"Never!" said Uncle Peabody. "I'm afraid they've got it up."

He had no sooner said it than a cry broke from my lips, and I sank down upon the grass weeping and sobbing. I lay amidst the ruins of the simple faith of childhood. It was as if the world and all its joys had come to an end.

Aunt Deel spoke in a low, kindly tone and came and lifted me to my feet very tenderly.

"Come, Bart, don't feel so about that old melon," said she. "It ain't worth it. Come with me. I'm going to give you a present—ayes I be!"

I was still crying when she took me to her trunk, and offered the grateful amusement of candy and a belt, all embroidered with blue and white beads.

"Now you see, Bart, how low and mean anybody is that takes what don't belong to 'em—ayes! They're snakes! Everybody hates 'em an' stamps on 'em when they come in sight—ayes!"

The abomination of the Lord was in her look and manner. How it shook my soul! He who had taken the watermelon had also taken from me something I was never to have again, and a very wonderful thing it was—faith in the goodness of men. My eyes had seen evil. The world had committed its first offense against me and my spirit was no longer the white and beautiful thing it had been. Still, therein lay the beginning of wisdom, and looking down the long vista of the years, I thank God for the great harvest of the lost watermelon. Better things had come in its place—understanding and what more, of an one thing that sudden revelation of the heart of childhood had lifted my soul out of the cold storage of a puritanic spirit, and warmed it into new life and opened its door for me.

In the afternoon she sent me over to Wills' to borrow a little tea. I stopped for a few minutes to play with Henry Wills—a boy not quite a year older than I. While playing there I discovered a piece of the rind of my melon in the dooryard. On that piece of rind I saw the cross which I had made one day with my thumb-nail. It was intended to indicate that the melon was solely and wholly mine. I felt a flush of anger.

"I hate you," I said as I approached him.

"I hate you," he answered. "You're a snake!" I said. "We now stood, face to face and breast to breast, like a pair of young roosters. He gave me a shove and told me to go home. I gave him a shove and told him I wouldn't. I pushed up close to him again and we glared into each other's eyes. Suddenly he spat in my face. I gave him a scratch on the forehead with my finger-nails. Then we fell upon each other and rolled on the ground and hit and scratched with feline ferocity.

My heart beat fast at the thought of the legendary Dunkelbergs. I looked me over from top to toe. "Heaven!" he exclaimed. "Go down to the brook and wash the mud off yer feet an' legs."

I ran for the brook and before I had returned to my uncle I heard the born blow.

"The Dunkelbergs!—the Dunkelbergs! Come quick!" it seemed to say.

Mr. Dunkelberg was a big, broad-shouldered, seaman-looking man. Somehow his face reminded me of a lion's face. He had a thick, long, outstanding mustache and side whiskers, and deep-set eyes and heavy eyebrows. He stood for half a moment looking down at me from a great height with his right hand in his pocket. I heard a little jingle of coins down where his hand was. It excited my curiosity. He took a step toward me and I retreated. I feared, a little, this big, lion-like man. My fears left me suddenly when he spoke in a small sneaky voice that reminded me of the chirping of a bird.

"Little boy, come here and I will make you a present," said he.

It reminded me of my disappointment when Aunt Deel tried to shoot his gun at a squirrel and only the cap cracked.

I went to him and he laid a silver piece in the palm of my hand. Aunt Deel began to hurry about getting dinner ready while Uncle Peabody and I sat down on the porch with our guests, among whom was a pretty, blue-eyed girl of about my own age.

"Sally, this is Barton Baynes. Can't you shake hands with him?" said Mrs. Dunkelberg.

With long, golden-brown hair that hung in curls.

"Sally, this is Barton Baynes—can't you shake hands with him?" said Mrs. Dunkelberg.

words in such a way that I dare say it prospered better in my ears because of the mystery by which its meanings were partly hidden. I had many questions to ask and she told me what were fairies and silks and diamonds and grand ladies and noble gentlemen.

We sat down to one of our familiar dinners of salt pork and milk gravy and apple pie now enriched by sweet pickles and preserves and frosted cake.

A query had entered my mind and soon after we had begun eating I asked:

"Aunt Deel, what is the difference between a boy and a girl?"

There was a little alliance in which my aunt drew in her breath and exclaimed, "Why!" and turned very red and covered her face with her apron. Uncle Peabody laughed so loudly that the chickens began to cackle. Mr. and Mrs. Dunkelberg also covered their faces. Aunt Deel rose and went to the stove and shoved the teapot along, exclaiming:

"Goodness gracious sakes alive!"

The tea stopped over on the stove. Uncle Peabody laughed louder and Mr. Dunkelberg's face was purple. Shep came running into the house just as I ran out of it. I had made up my mind that I had done something worse than tipping over a what-not. Thoroughly frightened I fled and took refuge behind the ash-house, where Sally found me. I knew of one thing I would never do again. She coaxed me into the grove where we had another play spell.

I needed just that kind of thing, and what a time it was for me! A pleasant sadness comes when I think of that day—it was so long ago. As the Dunkelbergs left us I stood looking down the road on which they were disappearing. That evening my ears caught a note of sadness in the voice of the katydids, and memory began to play its part with me. Best of all I remembered the kisses and the bright blue eyes and the soft curly hair with the smell of roses in it.

CHAPTER II.

I Meet the Silent Woman and Silas Wright, Jr.

body to take me to the tavern for dinner, where they were assuaged by cakes and jellies and chicken pie.

At Christmas I got a picture-book and forty raisins and three sticks of candy with red stripes on them and a Jew's-harp. That was the Christmas we went down to Aunt Lisa's to spend the day and I helped myself to two pieces of cake when the plate was passed and cried because they all laughed at my greediness. It was the day when Aunt Lisa's boy, Truman, got a silver watch and chain and her daughter Mary a gold ring, and when all the relatives were invited to come and be convinced, once and for all, of Uncle Roswell's prosperity, and be filled with envy and reconciled with jelly and preserves and roast turkey with sage dressing and mince and chicken pie! What an amount of preparation we had made for the journey, and how long we had talked about it!

In the spring my uncle hired a man to work for us—a poxy, brawny, sharp-featured fellow with keen gray eyes, of the name of Dug Draper. Aunt Deel hated him. I feared him but regarded him with great hope because he had a funny way of winking at me with one eye across the table and, further, because he could sing and did sing while he worked—songs that rattled from his lips in a way that amused me greatly. Then, too, he could rip out words that had a new and wonderful sound in them. I made up my mind that he was likely to become a valuable asset when I heard Aunt Deel saw to my Uncle Peabody:

"You'll have to send that loafer away, right now, ayes, I guess you will."

"Why?"

"'Cause this boy has learnt to swear like a pirate—ayes—he has!"

Uncle Peabody didn't know it but I myself had begun to suspect it, and that hour the man was sent away, and I remember that he left in anger with a number of those new words flying from his lips. A forced march to the upper room followed that event. Uncle Peabody explained that it was wicked to swear—that boys who did it had very bad luck, and mine came in a moment. I never had more of it come along in the same length of time.

After I ceased to play with the Wills boy Uncle Peabody used to say, often, it was a pity that I hadn't somebody of my own age for company. Every day I felt sorry that the Wills boy had turned out so badly, and I doubt not the cat and the shepherd dog and the chickens and Uncle Peabody also regretted his failures, especially the dog and Uncle Peabody, who bore all sorts of indignities for my sake.

One day when Uncle Peabody went for the mail he brought Amos Grimshaw to visit me. He was four years older than I—a freckled, red-haired boy with a large mouth and thin lips. He wore a silver watch and chain, which strongly recommended him in my view and enabled me to endure his air of condescension.

He let me feel it and look it all over and I slyly touched the chain with my tongue just to see if it had any taste to it, and Amos told me that his father had given it to him and that it always kept him "kind o' scared."



He Belabored the Bed With Tremendous Vigor, Exclaiming "You Dreadful Child!"

the bed with tremendous vigor. Meanwhile he looked at me and exclaimed: "You dreadful child!"

I knew that my sins were responsible for this violence. It frightened me and my cries increased.

The door at the bottom of the stairs opened suddenly.

When I asked what were "nospeaks" she told me that they were part of the wages of a good child. I was better paid for my care of the watermelon vine, for its growth was measured with a string every day and kept me interested. One morning I found five blossoms on it. I picked one and carried it to Aunt Deel. Another I destroyed in the tragedy of catching a bumblebee which had crawled into its cup. In due time three small melons appeared. When they were as big as a baseball I picked two of them. One I tasted and threw away as I ran to the pump for relief. The other I hurled at a dog on my way to school.

So that last melon on the vine had my undivided affection. It grew in size and reputation, and soon I learned that a reputation is about the worst thing that a watermelon can acquire while it is on the vine. I invited everybody that came to the house to go and see my watermelon. They looked it over and said pleasant things about it. When I was a boy people used to treat children and watermelons with a like solicitude. Both were a subject for jests and produced similar reactions in the human countenance.

At last Uncle Peabody agreed with me that it was about time to pick the melon. I decided to pick it immediately after meeting on Sunday, so that I could give it to my aunt and uncle at dinner-time. When we got home I ran for the garden. My feet and those of our friends and neighbors had literally worn a path to the melon. In eager haste I got my little wheelbarrow and ran with it to the end of that path. There I found nothing but broken vines! The melon had vanished. I ran back to the house almost overcome by a feeling of alarm, for I had thought long of that hour of pride when I should bring the melon and present it to my aunt and uncle.

"Uncle Peabody," I shouted, "my melon is gone."

"Well, I van!" said he, "somebody must 'a' stole it."

"But it was my melon," I said with a trembling voice.

"Yes, and I vum it's too bad! But, Bart, you ain't learned yet that there are wicked people in the world who come and take what don't belong to 'em."

There were tears in my eyes when I asked:

(Continued tomorrow)