

THE LIGHT IN THE CLEARING

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

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EDEN HOLDBEN, O'N AND I, DARRYL OF THE BLESSED ISLES,
KEEPING UP WITH LEZZE, ETC.

CHAPTER III.

We Go to Meeting and See Mr. Wright Again.

I had a chill that night and in the weeks that followed I was nearly burned up with lung fever. Doctor Clark came from Canton to see me every other day for a time and one evening Mr. Wright came with him and watched all night near my bedside.

In the morning he said that he could come the next Tuesday morning if we needed him and set out right after breakfast in the dim dawn light, to walk to Canton.

"Peabody Baynes," said my Aunt Deel as she stood looking out of the window at Mr. Wright, "that is one of the greatest, splendidest men that I ever see or heard of. He's an awful smart man, an' a day o' his time is worth more'n a month o' our'n, but he comes away off here to set up with a sick young one and walks back. Does that all—don't it?"

"If any one needs help Silas Wright is always on hand," said Uncle Peabody.

I was soon out of bed and he came to see me to sit up with me.

When I was well again, Aunt Deel said one day: "Peabody Baynes, I ain't heard no preachin' since Mr. Pangborn died. I guess we better go down to Canton to meetin' some Sunday. If there ain't no minister Silas Wright always reads a sermon. If he's home, and the paper says he don't go away for a month yet, I kind o' feel the need of a good sermon—aye!"

"All right. I'll hitch up the horses and we'll go. We can start at eight o'clock and take a bite with us an' git back here by three."

I had told Aunt Deel what Sally had said of my personal appearance.

"Your coat is good enough for anybody—aye!" said she. "I'll make you a pair o' breeches an' then I guess you won't have to be 'shamed no more."

She had spent several evenings making them out of an old gray flannel petticoat of hers and had put two



She Had Spent Several Evenings Making Them Out of an Old Gray Flannel Petticoat.

pockets in them of which I was very proud. They came just to the tops of my shoes, which pleased me, for thereby the glory of my new shoes suffered no encroachment.

The next Sunday after they were finished we had preaching in the schoolhouse and I was eager to go and wear my wonderful trousers. Uncle Peabody said that he didn't know whether his leg would hold out or not "through a whole meetin'." His left leg was lame from a wrench and pained him if he sat long in one position. I greatly enjoyed this first public exhibition of my new trousers. I remember praying in silence, as we sat down, that Uncle Peabody's leg would hold out. Later, when the long sermon had begun to weary me, I prayed that it would not.

It was a beautiful summer morning as we drove down the hills and from the summit of the last high ridge we could see the smoke of a steamer looming over the St. Lawrence and the big buildings of Canton on the distant flats below us. My heart beat fast when I reflected that I should soon see Mr. Wright and the Dunkelbergs. I had lost a little of my interest in Sally. Still I felt sure that when she saw my new breeches she would conclude that I was a person not to be trifled with.

When we got to Canton people were flocking to the big stone Presbyterian church. It was what they called a "devotion's meeting." I remember that Mr. Wright read from the Scriptures, and having explained that there was no minister in the village, read one of Mr. Edwards' sermons. In the course of which I went to sleep on the arm of my aunt. She awoke me when the service had ended, and whispered:

"Come, we're goin' down to speak to Mr. Wright."
I remember Mr. Wright kissed me and said:
"Hello! Here's my boy in a new pair o' trousers!"
"Put yer hand in there," I said proudly, as I took my own hand out of one of my pockets, and pointed the way.

He did not accept the invitation, but he laughed heartily and gave me a little hug.
When we went out of the church there stood Mr. and Mrs. Horace Dunkelberg, and Sally and some other children. It was a tragic moment for me when Sally laughed and ran behind her mother. Still worse was it when a couple of boys ran away crying, "Look at the breeches!"

I looked down at my breeches and wondered what was wrong with them. They seemed very splendid to me and yet I saw at once that they were not popular. I went close to my Aunt Deel and partly hid myself in her cloak. I heard Mrs. Dunkelberg say:
"Of course you'll come to dinner with us?"
For a second my hopes leaped high. I was hungry and visions of jelly cake and preserves rose before me. Of course there were the trousers, but perhaps Sally would get used to the trousers and ask me to play with her.

"Thank ye, but we've got a good ways to go and we fetched a bite with us—aye!" said Aunt Deel. Eagerly I awaited an invitation from the great Mrs. Dunkelberg that should be decisively urgent, but she only said:
"I'm very sorry you can't stay."
My hopes fell like bricks and vanished like bubbles.

The Dunkelbergs left us with pleasant words. They had asked me to shake hands with Sally, but I had clung to my aunt's cloak and firmly refused to make any advances. Slowly and without a word we walked across the park toward the tavern sheds.

We had started away up the South road when, to my surprise, Aunt Deel mildly attacked the Dunkelbergs.

These here village folks like to be waited on—aye!—an' they're awful anxious you should come to see 'em when ye can't—aye!—but when ye git to the village they ain't nigh so anxious—no they ain't!"

In the middle of the great cedar swamp near Little River Aunt Deel got out the lunch basket and I sat down on the buggy bottom between their legs and leaning against the dash. So disposed we ate our luncheon of fried cakes and bread and butter and maple sugar and cheese. What an efficient cure for good health were the doughnuts and cheese and sugar, especially if they were mixed with the illness of a Sunday. I had a headache also and soon fell asleep.

The sun was low when they awoke me in our dooryard.

I soon discovered that the Dunkelbergs had fallen from their high estate in our home and that Silas Wright, Jr., had taken their place in the conversation of Aunt Deel.

CHAPTER IV.

In the Light of the Candles.

One day the stage, on its way to Ballybeen, came to our house and left a box and a letter from Mr. Wright, addressed to my uncle, which read:

"Dear Sir—I send herewith a box of books and magazines in the hope that you or Miss Baynes will read them aloud to my little partner and in doing so get some enjoyment and profit for yourselves.

"Yours respectfully,
"S. WRIGHT, JR."

"P. S.—When the contents of the box have duly risen into your minds will you kindly see that it does a like service to your neighbors in School District No. 77 S. W. Jr."

"I guess Bart has made a friend of this great man—sartin ayes!" said Aunt Deel. "I wonder who'll be the next one?"

The work of the day ended, the candles were grouped near the edge of the table and my aunt's armchair was placed beside them. Then I sat on Uncle Peabody's lap by the fire or, as time went on, in my small chair beside him, while Aunt Deel adjusted her spectacles and began to read.

I remember vividly the evening we took out the books and tenderly felt their covers and read their titles. There were "Crusshanks' Comic Attainment" and "Hood's Comic Annual"; tales by Washington Irving and James K. Paulding; and Nathaniel Hawthorne and Miss Mitford and Miss Austen; the poems of John Milton and Felicia Hemans. Of the treasures in the box I have now in my possession: A life of Washington, "The Life and Writings of Doctor Luckworth," "The Stolen Child," by "John Galt, Esq.," "Rosine Laval," by "Mr. Smith"; Sermons and Essays by William Ellery Channing. We found in the box also, thirty numbers of the "United States Mammals and Democratic Review" and sundry copies of the "New York Mirror."

Aunt Deel began with "The Stolen Child." She read slowly and often paused for comment or explanation or laughter or to touch the corner of an eye with a corner of her handkerchief in moments when we were all deeply moved by the misfortunes of our favorite characters, which were acute and numerous.

In those magazines we read of the great West—"the poor man's paradise"—"the stoneless land of plenty"; of its delightful climate, of the ease with which the farmer prospered on its rich soil. Uncle Peabody spoke playfully of going West, after that, but Aunt Deel made no answer and concealed her opinion on that subject for a long time. As for myself, the reading had deepened my interest in the east and west and north and south and in the skies above them. How mysterious and inviting they had become!

One evening a neighbor had brought the Republic from the post-office. I opened it and read aloud these words in large type at the top of the page:

"Silas Wright Elected to the U. S. Senate."
"Well I want to know!" Uncle Peabody exclaimed. "That would make me forget it if I was goin' to be hung. Go on and read what it says."

I read the closing of our friend for the seat made vacant by the resignation of William L. Marcy, who had been elected governor, and the part which most impressed us were those words from a letter of Mr. Wright to Asahel Flagg of Albany, written when the former was asked to accept the place:

"I am too young and too poor for such an elevation. I have not had the experience in that great theater of politics to qualify me for a place so exalted and responsible. I prefer therefore the humbler position which I now occupy."

"That's his way," said Uncle Peabody. "They had hard work to convince him that he knew enough to be Surrogate."
"Big men have little conceits—aye!" said Aunt Deel with a significant glance at me.

The candles had burned low and I was watching the shroud of one of them when there came a rap at the door. It was unusual for any one to come to our door in the evening and we were a bit startled. Uncle Peabody opened it and old Kate entered without speaking and nodded to my aunt and uncle and sat down by the fire. Vividly I remembered the day of the fortune-telling. The same gentle smile lighted her face as she looked at me. She held up her hand with four fingers spread above it.

"Ayes," said Aunt Deel, "there are four perils."
My aunt rose and went into the hallway while I sat staring at the raged old woman. Her hair was white now and partly covered by a

worn and faded bonnet. Forbidding as she was I did not miss the sweetness in her smile and her blue eyes when she looked at me. Aunt Deel came with a plate of doughnuts and bread and butter and head cheese and said in a voice full of pity:

"Poor o' Kate—aye! Here's something for ye—aye!"
She turned to my uncle and said: "Peabody Baynes, what'll we do—I'd like to know—aye! She can't rove all night."

"I'll git some blankets an' make a bed for her, good enough for anybody, out in the hired man's room over the shed," said my uncle.

He brought the lantern—a little tower of perforated tin—and put a lighted candle inside of it. Then he

beckoned to the stranger, who followed him out of the front door with the plate of food in her hands.

"Well I declare! It's a long time since she went up this road—aye!" said Aunt Deel, yawning as she resumed her chair.

"Who is o' Kate?" I asked.

"Oh, just a pair o' crazy woman—wanders all 'round—aye!"

"What made her crazy?"

"Oh, I guess somebody misused and deceived her when she was young—aye! It's an awful wicked thing to do. Come, Bart—go right up to bed now. It's high time—aye!"

"I want to wait 'til Uncle Peabody comes back," said I.

"Why?"

"I—I'm afraid she'll do something to him."

"Nonsense! O' Kate is just as harmless as a kitten. You take your candle and go right up to bed—this minute—aye!"

I went up-stairs with the candle and undressed very slowly and thoughtfully while I listened for the footsteps of my uncle. I did not get into bed until I heard him come in and blow out his lantern and start up the stairway. As he undressed he told me how for many years the strange woman had been roving in the roads "up hill and down dale, thousands an' thousands o' miles," and never reaching the end of her journey.

In a moment we heard a low wail above the sounds of the breeze that shook the leaves of the old "popple" tree above our roof.

"What's that?" I whispered.

"I guess it's o' Kate ravin'," said Uncle Peabody.

It touched my heart and I lay listening for a time, but heard only the loud whisper of the popple leaves.

CHAPTER V.

The Great Stranger

Some strangers came along the road those days—hunters, peddlers and the like—and their coming filled me with a joy which mostly went away with them, I regret to say. None of these, however, appealed to my imagination as did old Kate. But there was one stranger greater than she—greater indeed, than any other who came into Rattleroad. He came rarely and would not be long detained. How curiously we looked at him, knowing his fame and power! This great stranger was Money.

I shall never forget the day that my uncle showed me a dollar bill and a little silver, gold coin and three pieces of silver, nor can I forget how carefully he watched them while they lay in my hands and presently put them back into his wallet. That was long before the time of which I am writing. I remember hearing him say, one day of that year, when I asked him to take us to the Caravan of Wild Beasts which was coming to the village:

"I'm sorry, but it's been a hundred Sundays since I had a dollar in my wallet for more than ten minutes."

I have his old account book for the years of 1837 and 1838. Here are some of the entries:

"Balanced accounts with J. Dorothy and gave him my note for \$2.15 to be paid in salts January 1, 1838. Sold ten bushels of wheat to E. Miner at 90 cents, to be paid in goods."

"Sold two sheep to Flavus Curtis and took his note for \$6, payable in boots on or before March the first."

Only one entry in more than a hundred mention money, and this was the sum of eleven cents received in balance from a neighbor.

So it will be seen that a spirit of mutual accommodation served to help us over the rough going. Mr. Grimshaw, however, demanded his pay in cash and that I find was mainly the habit of the money-lenders.

We were poor but our poverty was not like that of those days in which I am writing. It was proud and cleanly and well-fed. Our fathers had seen heroic service in the wars and we knew it.

I was twelve years old when I began to be the reader for our little family. Aunt Deel had long complained that she couldn't keep up with her knitting and read so much. We had not seen Mr. Wright for nearly two years, but he had sent us the novels of Sir Walter Scott and I had had them heart deep into the creed battles of Old Mortality.

Then came the evil days of 1837, when the story of our lives began to quicken its pace and excite our interest in its coming chapters. It gave us enough to think of, God knows.

Wild speculations in land and the American paper-money system had brought us into rough going. The banks of the city of New York had suspended payment of their notes. They could no longer meet their engagements. As usual, the burden fell heaviest on the poor. It was hard to get money even for black salts.

Uncle Peabody had been silent and depressed for a month or more. He had signed a note for Rodney Barnes, a cousin, long before and was afraid that he would have to pay it. I didn't know what a note was and I remember that one night, when I lay thinking about it, I decided that it must be something in the nature of horse colic. My uncle told me that a note was a trouble which attacked the brain instead of the stomach.

One autumn day in Canton Uncle Peabody traded three sheep and twenty bushels of wheat for a cook stove and brought it home in the big wagon. Rodney Barnes came with him to help set up the stove. He was a big giant of a man with the longest nose in the township. I have often wondered how any one would solve the problem of

missing Mr. Barnes in the immediate region of his nose, the same being in the nature of a defense.

That evening I was chiefly interested in the stove. What a joy it was to me with its damper and griddles and high oven and the shiny edge on its hearth! It rivalled, in its novelty and charm, any tin peddler's cart that ever came to our door. John Axtell and his wife, who had seen it pass their house, hurried over for a look at it. Every hand was on the stove as we tenderly carried it into the house, piece by piece, and set it up. Then they cut a hole in the upper floor and the stone chimney and fitted the pipe. How keenly we watched the building of the fire. How quickly it roared and began to heat the room!

When the Axtells had gone away Aunt Deel said:
"It's grand! It is sartin—but I'm 'traid we can't afford it—aye I be!"
"We can't afford to freeze any longer. I made up my mind that we couldn't go through another winter as we have," was my uncle's answer.

"How much did it cost?" she asked.

"Not much different from thirty-four dollars in sheep and grain," he answered.

Rodney Barnes stayed to supper and spent a part of the evening with us.

Like other settlers there, Mr. Barnes was a cheerful optimist. Everything looked good to him until it turned out badly.

He told how he had heard that it was a growing country near the great water highway of the St. Lawrence. Prosperous towns were building up in it. There were going to be great cities in Northern New York. There were rich stores of lead and iron in the rocks. Mr. Barnes had bought two hundred acres at ten dollars an acre. He had to pay a fee of five per cent. to Grimshaw's lawyer for the survey and the papers. This left him owing fourteen hundred dollars on his farm—much more than it was worth.

Our cousin twisted the poker in his great hands until it squeaked as he stood before my uncle and said:
"My wife and I have chopped and burnt and piled and hauled rocks an' shoveled dung an' milked an' churned until we are worn out. For almost twenty years we've been working days an' nights an' Sundays. My mortgage was over-due. I owed six hundred dollars on it. I thought it all over one day an' went up to Grimshaw's an' took him by the back of the neck and shook him. He said he would drive me out o' the country. He gave me six months to pay up. I had to pay or lose the land. I got the money on the note that you signed over in Potsdam. Nobody in Canton would 'a' dared to lend it to me."

"Why?" my uncle asked.

"Fraid o' Grimshaw. He didn't want me to be able to pay it. The place is worth more than six hundred dollars now—that's the reason. I intended to cut some timber an' haul it to the village this winter so I could pay a part o' the note an' git more time as I told ye, but the roads have been so bad I couldn't do any hauling."

My uncle went and took a drink at the water pail. I saw by his face that he was unusually wrought up.

"My heavens an' earth!" he exclaimed as he sat down again.

"It's the brain colic," I said to myself as I looked at him.

Mr. Barnes seemed to have it also.

"Too much note," I whispered.

"I'm awful sorry, but I've done everything I could," said Mr. Barnes. "Ain't there somebody that'll take another mortgage?—it ought to be safe now," my uncle suggested.

"Money is so tight it can't be done. The bank has got all the money an' Grimshaw owns the bank. I've tried and tried, but I'll make you sartin. I'll give you a mortgage until I can turn 'round."

So I saw how Rodney Barnes, like other settlers in Luckitysplit, had gone into bondage to the landlord.

"How much do you owe on this place?" Barnes asked.

"Seven hundred an' fifty dollars," said my uncle.

"Is it due?"

"It's been due a year an' if I have to pay that note I'll be short my interest."

"God o' Israel! I'm scairt," said Uncle Peabody.

Down crashed the stick of wood into the box.

"What about it?"

"It would be like him to put the screws on you now. You've got between him an' his prey. You've taken the mouse away from the cat."

I remember the little panic that fell on us then. I could see tears in the eyes of Aunt Deel as she sat with her head leaning wearily on her hand.

"If he does I'll do all I can," said Barnes, "whatever I've got will be yours."

Rodney Barnes left us, and I remember how Uncle Peabody stood in the middle of the floor and whistled the merriest tune he knew.

"Stand right up here," he called in his most cheerful tone. "Stand right up here before me, both o' ye."

I got Aunt Deel by the hand and led her toward my uncle. We stood facing him. "Stand straighter," he demanded. "Now, altogether, One, two, three, ready—sing."

He beat time with his hand in imitation of the singing master at the schoolhouse and we joined him in singing an old tune which began: "Oh, boy be he and what a comfort he's been to us!"

This irresistible spirit of the man

brushed a bad hair and got us up to bed in fairly good condition.

A few days later the note came due and its owner insisted upon full payment. There was such a clamor for money those days! I remember that my aunt had sixty dollars which she had saved, little by little, by selling eggs and chickens. She had planned to use it to buy a tombstone for her mother and father—a long-cherished ambition. My uncle needed the most of it to help pay the note. We drove to Potsdam on that sad errand and what a time we had getting there and back in deep mud and sand and jolting over corduroys!

"Bart," my uncle said the next evening, as I took down the book to read, "I guess we'd better think these things over a little tonight. There are hard times. If we can find anybody with money enough to buy 'em I dunno but we better sell the sheep."

"If you hadn't been a fool," my aunt exclaimed with a look of great distress—"aye! if you hadn't been a fool."

"I'm just what I be, an' I ain't so big a fool that I need to be reminded of it," said my uncle.

"I'll stay home an' work," I proposed bravely.

"You ain't old enough for that," sighed Aunt Deel.

"I want to keep you in school," said Uncle Peabody, who sat making a splint broom.

While we were talking in walked Benjamin Grimshaw—the rich man of the hills. He didn't stop to knock, but walked right in as if the house were his own. It was common gossip that he held a mortgage on every acre of the countryside. I had never liked him, for he was a stern-eyed man who was always scolding somebody, and I had not forgotten what his son had said of him.

"Good night!" he exclaimed curtly, as he sat down and set his cane between his feet and rested his hands upon it. He spoke hoarsely and I was

remember the curious notion came to me that he looked like our old man. He wore a thin, gray beard under his chin. His mouth was shut tight in a long line curving downward a little at the ends. My uncle used to say that his mouth was made to keep his thoughts from leaking and going to waste. He had a big body, a big chin, a big mouth, a big nose and big ears and hands. His eyes lay small in this setting of bigness.

"Why, Mr. Grimshaw, it's years since you've been in our house—aye!" said Aunt Deel.

"I suppose it is," he answered rather simply. "I don't have much time to get around. I have to work. There's some people seem to be able to git along without it. I see you've got one of these newfangled stoves," he added as he looked it over. "Huh! Rich folks can have anything they want."

Uncle Peabody had sat splintering the long stick of yellow birch. I observed that the jackknife trembled in his hand. His tone had a touch of unattractiveness, proceeding no doubt from his fear of the man before him, as he said:

"When I bought that stove I felt richer than I do now. I had almost enough to settle with you up to date, but I signed a note for a friend and had to pay it."

"Ayuh! I suppose so," Grimshaw answered in a tone of bitter irony which cut me like a knife-blade, young as I was. "What business have you signin' notes an' givin' away money which ain't yours to give—I'd like to know? What business have you actin' like a rich man when you can't pay yer honest debts? I'd like to know that, too?"

"If I've ever acted like a rich man it's been when I ain't lookin'," said Uncle Peabody.

"What business have you to go en-largin' yer family—akin' another mouth to feed and another-body to spin for? That costs money. I want to tell you one thing, Baynes, you've got to pay up or git out o' here."

He raised his cane and shook it in the air as he spoke.

"Oh, I ain't no doubt o' that," said Uncle Peabody. "You'll have to have yer money—that's sure; an' you will have it if I live, every cent of it. This boy is goin' to be a great help to me—you don't know what a good boy he is and what a comfort he's been to us!"

These words of my beloved uncle

uncovered my emotions so that I put my elbow on the wood-box and leaned my head upon it and sobbed.

"I ain't goin' to be hard on ye, Baynes," said Mr. Grimshaw as he rose from his chair; "I'll give ye three months to see what you can do. I wouldn't wonder if th' boy would turn out all right. He's big an' cordy of his age and a purty likely boy, they tell me."

Mr. Grimshaw opened the door and stood for a moment looking at us and added in a milder tone: "You've got one o' the best farms in this town an' if ye work hard an' use common sense ye ought to be out o' debt in five years—maybe less."

He closed the door and went away. Neither of us moved or spoke as we listened to his footsteps on the gravel path that went down to the road and to the sound of his buggy as he drove away. Then Uncle Peabody broke the silence by saying:

"He's the dam'dest—"

He stopped, set the half-splintered stick aside, closed his jackknife and went to the water-pail to cool his emotions with a drink.

Aunt Deel took up the subject-where he had dropped it, as if no half-expressed sentiment would satisfy her, saying:

"—old skink that ever lived in this world, ayes! I ain't goin' to hold my opinion o' that man no longer, ayes! I can't. It's too powerful—aye!"

Having recovered my composure I repeated that I should like to give up school and stay at home and work.

Aunt Deel interrupted me by saying:

"I have an idee that Silas Wright will help us—aye! He's comin' home, an' you better go down an' see him—aye! He'd'n't ye?"

"Bart an' I'll go down to-morrer," said Uncle Peabody.

Some fourteen months before that day my uncle had taken me to Potsdam and traded grain and salts for what he called a "rip roarin' fine suit o' clothes" with boots and cap and shirt and collar and necktie to match. I had earned them by sawing and cording wood at three shillings a cord. How often we looked back to those better days! The clothes had been too big for me and I had had to wait until my growth had taken up the "slack" in my coat and trousers before I could venture out of the neighborhood. I had tried them on every week or so for a long time. Now my stature filled them handsomely and they filled me with a pride and satisfaction which I had never known before.

"Now may the Lord help ye to be careful—awful, terrible careful o' them clothes every minute o' this day," Aunt Deel cautioned as she looked at me. "Don't get no horse sweat nor wagon grease on 'em."

To Aunt Deel wagon grease was the worst enemy of a happy and respectable home.

We hitched our team to the grass-hopper spring wagon and set out on our journey. It was a warm, hazy Indian-summer day in November. As we passed "the mill" we saw the Silent Woman looking out of the little window of her room above the blacksmith shop—a low, weather-stained, frame building, hard by the main road, with a narrow hanging stair on the side of it.

"She keeps watch by the window when she ain't travellin'," said Uncle Peabody. "Knows all that's goin' on—that woman—knows who goes to the village an' how long they stay. When Grimshaw goes by they say she hustles off down the road in her rags. She looks like a sick dog herself, but I've heard that she keeps that room o' hers 'jest as neat as a pin."

Near the village we passed a smart-looking buggy, drawn by a spry-footed horse in shiny harness. Then I noticed with a pang that our wagon was covered with dry mud and that our horses were rather bony and our harness in a kind of lead color. So I was in an humble state of mind when we entered the village.

There was a crowd of men and women in front of Mr. Wright's office and through its open door I saw many of his fellow townsmen. We waited at the door for a few minutes. I crowded in while Uncle Peabody stood talking to a villager. The Senator caught sight of me and came to my side and put his hand on my head and said: