

THE LIGHT IN THE CLEARING

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

By IRVING BACHELLER

AUTHOR OF "EVEN HOLDEN, O'Y AND I, DARRIL OF THE BLESSED ISLES, KEEPING UP WITH LIZZIE, ETC., ETC."

"All true! I have seen it stinking into the bones of the young and I have seen it lying down with the aged in the dust of their graves. It is a big book—the one we are now opening. God help us! It has more pages than all the days of your life. Just think of your body. A brave and tender youth! It is like a sponge. How it takes things in and holds 'em an' feeds upon 'em! A part of every apple ye eat sinks down into yer blood an' bones. Ye can't get it out. It's the same way with the books ye read an' the thoughts ye enjoy. They go down into yer bones an' ye can't get 'em out. That's why I like to think of Michael Henry. His food is good thoughts and his wine is laughter. I had a long visit with M. H. last night when ye were all in bed. His face was a chunk of laughter. Oh, what a limb he is! I wish I could tell ye all the good things he said."

"There comes Colonel Hand," said Mrs. Hackett as she looked out of the window. "The poor lonely Whig! He has nothing to do these days but sit around the tavern."

Colonel Hand was a surly-looking man beyond middle age, with large eyes that showed signs of dissipation. He had a small, dark tuft beneath his lower lip and thin, black, untidy hair. "What do ye think has happened?" he asked as he looked down upon us with a majestic movement of his hand. "The son of that old Bucktail, Ben Grimshaw, has been arrested and brought to jail for murder."

"For murder?" asked Mr. and Mrs. Hackett in one breath.

"For bloody murder, sir," the colonel went on. "It was the shooting of that man in the town of Pollybeen a few weeks ago. Thing has come to a pretty pass in this country, I should say. Talk about law and order; we don't know what it means here and why should we? The party in power is avowedly opposed to it—yes, sir. It has fattened upon bribery and corruption. Do you think that the son of Ben Grimshaw will receive punishment even if he is proved guilty? Not at all. He will be protected—ye mark my words."

He bowed and left us. When the door had closed behind him Mr. Hackett said:

"Another victim horned by the Rounddragon! If a man were to be slain by a bear back in the woods Colonel Hand would look for guilt in the opposition party. Michael Henry, whatever the truth may be regarding the poor boy in jail, we are in no way responsible. Away with adjectives! What is that?"

Mr. Hackett inclined his ear and then added: "Michael Henry says that he may be innocent and that we had better go and see if we can help him. Now I hadn't thought of that. Had you, Mary?"

"No," the girl answered. "We must be letting Mike go ahead of us always," said her father. "You saw the crime, I believe," turning to me.

"I told them all I knew of it. 'Upon my word, I like you, my brave lad,' said the schoolmaster. 'I heard of all this and decided that you would be a help to Michael Henry and a creditable student. Come, let us go and pay our compliments to the senator.'"

The schoolmaster and I went over to Mr. Wright's house—a white, frame building which had often been pointed out to me. Mrs. Wright, a fine-looking lady who met us at the door, said that the senator had gone over to the mill with his wheelbarrow.

"We've plenty of time and we'll wait for him," said the schoolmaster. "I see him!" said little John as he and Ruth ran to the gate and down the rough plank walk to meet him.

We saw him coming a little way down the street in his shirt sleeves with his bow in front of him. He stopped and lifted little John in his arms, and after a moment put him down and embraced Ruth.

"Well, I see ye still love the tender embrace of the wheelbarrow," said Mr. Hackett as we approached the senator. "My embrace in the tenderness of the two," the latter laughed with a look at his hands.

He recognized me and seized my two hands and shook them as he said: "Upon my word, here is my friend Bart. I was not looking for you here."

He put his hand on my head, now higher than his shoulder, and said: "I was not looking for you here."

He asked about my aunt and uncle and expressed joy at learning that I was now under Mr. Hackett.

"I shall be here for a number of weeks," he said. "And I shall want to see you often. Maybe we'll go hunting some Saturday."

We bade him good morning and he went on with his wheelbarrow, which was loaded, I remember, with stout sacks of meal and flour.

We went to the school at half past



I Went With Him While He Fed His Chickens and Two Small Shots.

eight. "What a thrilling place it was with its 78 children and its three rooms. How noisy they were as they waited in the schoolyard for the bell to ring! I stood by the door looking very foolish, I dare say, for I knew not what to do with myself. My legs encased in the tow breeches felt as if they were on fire. I saw that most of the village boys wore boughten clothes and fine boots. I looked down at my own leather and was a tower of shame on a foundation of greased cowhide. Sally Dunkelberg came in with some other girls and pretended not to see me. That was the hardest blow I suffered.

Among the handsome, well-dressed boys of the village was Henry Willis—the boy who had stolen my watermelon. I had never forgiven him for that or for the killing of my little hen. The bell rang and we marched into the big room, while a fat girl with crinkly hair played on a melodeon. Henry and another boy tried to shove me out of the end and a big paper wad struck the side of my head as we were marching in and after we were seated a cross-eyed, freckled girl in a red dress made a face at me.

It was, on the whole, the unhappiest day of my life. During recess I slapped a boy's face for calling me a rascal and the two others who came to help him went away full of fear and astonishment, for I had the strength of a young moose in me those days. After that they began to make friends with me.

In the noon hour a man came to me in the schoolyard with a subpoena for the examination of Amos Grimshaw and explained its meaning.

While I was talking with this man Sally passed me walking with another girl and said:

"Hello, Bart!"

I observed that Henry Willis joined them and walked down the street at the side of Sally. I got my first pang of jealousy then.

When school was out that afternoon Mr. Hackett said I could have an hour to see the sights of the village. So I set out, feeling much depressed.

I walked toward the house of Mr. Wright and saw him digging potatoes in the garden and went in. I knew that he was my friend.

"Well, Bart, how do you like school?" he asked.

"Not very well," I answered. "Of course not! It's new to you now, and you miss your aunt and uncle. Stick to it. You'll make friends and get interested before long."

"I want to go home," I declared. "Now let's look at the compass," he suggested. "You're lost for a minute, and like all lost people you're heading the wrong way. Don't be misled by selfishness. Forget what you want to do and think of what we want you to do. We want you to make a man of yourself. You must do it for the sake of those dear people who have done so much for you. The needle points toward the schoolhouse yonder."

He went on with his work, and as I walked away I understood that the needle he referred to was my conscience.

I went about my chores. There was to be no more wavering in my conduct. At the supper table Mr. Hackett kept us laughing with songs and jests and stories. The boy John, having been reprimanded for rapid eating, hurried his spoon upon the floor.

"Those in favor of his punishment will please say aye!" said the schoolmaster.

I remember that we had a divided house on that important question. The schoolmaster said: "Michael Henry wishes him to be forgiven on promise of better conduct, but for the next offense he shall ride the bucket."

This meant lying for a painful moment across his father's knee.

The promise was given and our merrymaking resumed. The district attorney, whom I had met before, came to see me after supper and asked more questions and advised me to talk with no one about the shooting without his consent. Soon he went away, and after I had learned my lesson Mr. Hackett said:

"Let us walk up to the jail and spend a few minutes with Amos."

We hurried to the jail. The sheriff, a stout-built, stern-faced man, admitted us.

"Can we see the Grimshaw boy?" Mr. Hackett inquired.

"I guess so," he answered as he lazily rose from his chair and took down a bunch of large keys which had been hanging on the wall. "His father has just left."

He spoke in a low, solemn tone which impressed me deeply as he held a lighted candle in the hand of

schoolmaster. He led us through a door into a narrow corridor. He thrust a big key into the lock of a heavy iron grating and threw it open and bade us step in. We entered an ill-smelling stucco-floored room with a number of cells against its rear wall. He locked the door behind us. I saw a face and



I Saw a Face and Figure Behind the Grated Door of One of These Cells.

figure in the dim candle light, behind the grated door of one of these cells. How lonely and dejected and helpless was the expression of that figure! The sheriff went to the door and unlocked it.

"Hello, Grimshaw," he said sternly. "Step out here."

It all went to my heart—the manners of the sheriff so like the cold iron of his keys and doors—the dim candle light, the pale, frightened youth who walked toward us. We shook his hand and he said that he was glad to see us. I saw the scar under his left ear and reaching out upon his cheek, which my stone had made, and knew that he bore the mark of Cain.

He asked if he could see me alone and the sheriff shook his head and said sternly:

"Against the rules."

"Amos, I've a boy of my own an' I feel for ye," said the schoolmaster. "I'm going to come here, now and then, to cheer ye up and bring ye some books to read. If there's any word of advice I can give ye—let me know. Have ye a lawyer?"

"There's one coming tomorrow."

"Don't say a word about the case, boy, to anyone but your lawyer—jud that."

We left him and went to our home and beds, I to spend half the night thinking of my discovery, since which, for some reason, I had no doubt of the guilt of Amos, but I spoke not of it to anyone and the secret worried me.

Next morning on my way to school I passed a scene more strange and memorable than any in my long experience. I saw the shabby figure of old Benjamin Grimshaw walking in the old path. His hands were in his pockets, his eyes bent upon the ground, his lips moving as if he were in deep thought. Moving Kate, the ragged, silent woman who, for the fortune of Amos, had drawn a gibbet, the shadow of which was now upon him, walked slowly behind the money lender pointing at him with her bony forefinger. Her stern eyes watched him as the cat watches when its prey is near it. She did not notice me. Silently, her feet wrapped in rags, she walked behind the man, always pointing at him. When he stopped she stopped. When he resumed his slow progress she followed. It thrilled me partly because I had begun to believe in the weird, mysterious power of the Silent Woman. I had twenty minutes to spare and so I turned into the main street behind and close by them. I saw him stop and buy some crackers and an apple and a piece of cheese. Meanwhile she stood pointing at him. He saw, but gave no heed to her. He walked along the street in front of the stores, she following as before. How patiently she followed!

I started for the big schoolhouse and a number of boys joined me with pleasant words.

Sally ran past us with that low-fired Willie boy, who carried her books for her. His father had gone into the grocery business and Henry wore boughten clothes. I couldn't tell Sally how mean he was. I was angry and decided not to speak to her until she spoke to me. I got along better in school, although there was some tittering when I recited, probably because I had a broader dialect and bigger boots than the boys in the village.

CHAPTER IX.

I Meet President Van Buren and Am Cross-Examined by Mr. Grimshaw.

The days went easier after that. The boys took me into their play and some of them were most friendly. I had a swift foot and a good eye as well as a strong arm, and could hold my own at three old cat—a kind of baseball which we played in the schoolyard. Saturday came. As we were sitting down at the table that morning the younger children clung to the knees of Mr. Hackett and begged him to take them up the river in a boat.

"Good Lord! What wilt thou give when I grow childless?" he exclaimed with his arms around them.

"That was the question of Abraham, and it often comes to me. Of course we shall go. But hark! Let us hear what the green chair has to say."

There was a moment of silence and then he went on with a merry laugh. "Right ye are, Michael Henry! You are always right, my boy—God bless your soul! We shall take Bart with us an' doughnuts an' cheese an' cookies an' dried meat for all."

From that moment I date the beginning of my love for the occupant of the green chair in the home of Michael Hackett. Those good people were Catholics and I a Protestant and yet this Michael Henry always insisted upon the most delicate consideration for my faith and feelings.

"I promised to spend the morning in the field with Mr. Wright, if I may have your consent, sir," I said.

"Then we shall console ourselves, knowing that you are in better company," said Mr. Hackett.

Mr. Dunkelberg called at the house in Ashery lane to see me after breakfast.

"Bart, if you will come with me I should like to order some store clothes and boots for you," he said in his sneaky voice.

For a moment I knew not how to answer him. Nettled as I had been by Sally's treatment of me, the offer was like rubbing salt on the soreness of my spirit.

I brushed and surveyed my garments and said:

"I guess I look pretty bad, don't I?"

"You look all right, but I thought maybe you would feel better in softer raiment, especially if you care to go around much with the young people. I am an old friend of the family and I guess it would be proper for me to buy the clothes for you. When you are older you can buy a suit for me, some time, if you care to."

It should be understood that well-to-do people in the towns were more particular about their dress those days than now.

"I'll ask my aunt and uncle about it," I proposed.

"That's all right," he answered. "I'm going to drive to your house this afternoon and your uncle wishes you to go with me. We are all to have a talk with Mr. Grimshaw."

He left me and I went over to Mr. Wright's.

They told me that he was cutting corn in the back lot, where I found him.

"Mr. Dunkelberg came this morning and wanted to buy me some new clothes and boots," I said.

The senator stopped work and stood looking at me with his hands upon his hips.

"I wouldn't let him do it if I were you," he said thoughtfully.

Just then I saw a young man come running toward us in the distant field. Mr. Wright took out his compass.

"Look here," he said, "you see the needle points due north."

He took a lodestone out of his pocket, and holding it near the compass moved it back and forth. The needle followed it.

The young man came up to us breathing deeply. Perspiration was rolling off his face. He was much excited and spoke with some difficulty.

"Senator Wright," he gasped, "Mrs. Wright sent me down to tell you that President Van Buren is at the house."

I remember vividly the look of mild amusement in the senator's face and the serene calmness with which he looked at the young man and said to him:

"Tell Mrs. Wright to make him comfortable in our easiest chair and to say to the president that I shall be up directly."

To my utter surprise he resumed his talk with me as the young man went away.

"You see all ways are north when you put this lodestone near the needle," he went on. "If it is to tell you the truth you must keep the lodestone away from the needle. It's that way, too, with the compass of your soul, partner. There the lodestone is selfishness, and with its help you can make any direction look right to you and soon—you're lost."

He bound the last bundle and then we walked together toward the house, the senator carrying his sickle.

"I shall introduce you to the president," he said as we neared our destination. "Then perhaps you had better leave us."

I could not remember that I had ever been "introduced" to anybody. I knew that people put their wits on ex-

hibition and often hung down a "snag" by way of demonstrating their fitness for the honor, when they were introduced in books. I remember asking rather timidly:

"What shall I say when—when you introduce me?"

"Oh, say anything you want to say," he answered with a look of amusement.

"I'm kind o' scared," I said.

"You needn't be—he was once a poor boy just like you."

"Just like me!" I repeated thoughtfully, for while I had heard a good deal of that kind of thing in our home, it had not, somehow, got under my jacket, as they used to say.

"Just like you—cowhide and all—the son of a small freeholder in Kinderhook on the Hudson," he went on. "But he was well fed and he had body and kept his heart clean. So of course he grew and is still growing. That's a curious thing about men and women, Bart. If they are in good ground and properly cared for they never stop growing—never!—and that's a pretty full word—isn't it?"

We had come in sight of the house. I lagged behind a little when I saw the great man sitting on the small piazza with Mrs. Wright. "I see vividly, as I write, the full figure, the ruddy, kindly face, the large nose, the gray eyes, the thick halo of silvered hair extending from his collar to the bald top of his head. He rose and said in a deep voice:

"He sows ill luck, who hinders the reaper."

Mr. Wright hung his steele on a small tree in the dooryard and answered:

"The plowman has overtaken the reaper, Mr. President. I bid you welcome to my humble home."

"It is a pleasure to be here and a regret to call you back to Washington," said the president as they shook hands.

"I suppose that means an extra session," the senator answered.

"First let me reassure you. I shall get away as soon as possible, for I know that a president is a heavy burden for one to have on his hands."

"Don't worry. I can get along with almost any kind of a human being, especially if he like pudding and milk as well as you do," said the senator, who then introduced me in these words:

"Mr. President, this is my young friend, Barton Baynes, of the neighborhood of Lickitysplit in the town of Ballybeen—a coming man of this county."

"Come on," was the playful remark of the president as he took my hand. "I shall be looking for you."

I had carefully chosen my words and I remember saying, with some dignity, like one in a story book, although with a trembling voice:

"It is an honor to meet you, sir, and of his journey or its result.

"How do you know?" snapped Mr. Grimshaw.

"This boy see it plain. It was a gun with a piece of wood broke out of the stock."

"Is that so?" was the brusque demand of the money lender as he turned to me.

"Yes, sir," I answered.

"The boy lies," he snapped, and turning to my uncle added: "Ye mad 'cause I'm tryin' to make ye pay yer honest debts—ain't ye now?"

Uncle Peabody, keeping his temper, shook his head and calmly said: "No, I ain't anything ag'in you or Amos, but it's got to be so that a man can travel the roads of 'is town without gettin' his head blowed off."

Mr. Dunkelberg turned to me and asked:

"Are you sure that the stock of the gun you saw was broken?"

"Yes, sir—and I'm almost sure it was Amos that ran away with it."

"Why?"

"I picked up a stone and threw it at him and it grazed the left side of his face, and the other night I saw the scar it made."

My aunt and uncle and Mr. Dunkelberg moved with astonishment as I spoke of the scar. Mr. Grimshaw, with keen eyes fixed upon me, gave a little grin of incredulity.

"Huh!—Liar!" he muttered.

"I'm not a liar," I declared with indignation, whereupon my aunt angrily stirred the fire in the stove and Uncle Peabody put his hand on my arm and said:

"Hush, Bart! Keep your temper, son."

"If you tell these things you may be the means of sending an innocent boy to his death," Mr. Dunkelberg said to me. "I wouldn't be too sure about 'em if I were you. It's so easy to be mistaken. You couldn't be sure in the dusk that the stone really hit him, could you?"

I answered: "Yes, sir—I saw the stone hit and I saw him put his hand on the place while he was running. I guess it hurt him some."

"Look a' here, Baynes," Mr. Grimshaw began in that familiar scolding tone of his, "I know what you want an' we might jest as well git right down to business first as last. You keep this boy still an' I'll give ye five years' interest."

Aunt Deed gave a gasp and quickly Uncle Peabody covered her mouth with her hand, rose from his chair with a strange look on his face. He swung his big right hand in the air as he said:

"By the eternal Jumpin'—"

He stopped, pulled down the left sleeve of his flannel shirt and walked to the water pail and drank out of the dipper.

"Say, Mr. Grimshaw, I'm awful sorry for ye," said my uncle as he returned to his chair, "but I've always learnt this boy to tell the truth an' the hull truth. I know the danger I'm in. We're gettin' old. It'll be hard to

shadow that fell upon her face. She was vexed and turned and ran away from me without another word and I felt a pang of regret as I went to the lonely and deserted home of the schoolmaster.

At twelve-thirty Mr. Dunkelberg came for me, with a high-stepping horse in a new harness and a shiny, still-running buggy. He wore gloves and a beaver hat and sat very erect and had little to say.

"I hear you met the president," he remarked.

"Yes, sir. I was introduced to him this morning," I answered a bit too proudly, and wondering how he had heard of my good fortune, but deeply gratified at his knowledge of it.

"What did he have to say?"

I described the interview and the looks of the great man. Not much more was said as we sped away toward the deep woods and the high hills.

I was eager to get home but wondered why he should be going with me to talk with Mr. Grimshaw and my uncle. Of course I suspected that he had to do with Amos, but how I knew not. He hummed in the rough going and thoughtfully flicked the bushes with his whip. I never knew a more persistent hummer.

Aunt Deed shook hands with Mr. Dunkelberg and then came to me and said:

"Wal, Bart Baynes! I never was so glad to see anybody in all the days of my life—ayes! We been lookin' up the road for an hour—yes! You come right into the house this minute—both o' you."

The table was spread with the things I enjoyed most—big, brown biscuits and a great comb of honey surrounded with its nectar and a pitcher of milk and a plate of cheese and some jerked meat and an apple pie.

"Set right down an' eat—I just want to see ye eat—ayes I do!"

Mr. Grimshaw came soon after we had finished our luncheon. He hitched his horse at the post and came in.

"Good day," he said, once and for all, as he came in at the open door. "Baynes, I want to have a talk with you and the boy. Tell me what you know about that murder."

"Wal, I had some business over to Plattsburg," my uncle began. "While I was there I thought I'd go and see Amos. So I drove out to Beekman's farm. They told me that Amos had left there after workin' four days. They gave him fourteen shillins an' he was goin' to take the stage in the mornin'. He left some time in the night an' took Beekman's rifle with him, so they said. There was a piece of wood broke out of the stock of the rifle. That was the kind of gun that was used in the murder."

It surprised me that my uncle knew all this. He had said nothing to me of his journey or its result.

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staff over ag'in an' you can find out if ye want to an' I'm as scared of 'em as a mouse in a cat's paw, but the boy has got to tell the truth right or plain. I couldn't muzzle him if I tried—he's too much of a man.