THE LIGHT IN THE CLEARING

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

By

IRVING BACHELLER

AUTHOR OF
EBEN HOLDEN, D'RI AND I, DARREL OF THE BLESSED ISLES, KEEPING UP WITH LIZZIE, ETC., ETC

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 laddie 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—get 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."

For some months I had been studying a book just published, entitled, "Stenographic Sound-Hand," and had learned its alphabet and practiced the use of it. That evening I took down the remarks of Mr. Hacket in sound-hand.

The academy chapel was crowded with the older boys and girls and the townfolk. The master never clipped his words in school as he was wont to do when talking familiarly with the children.

"Since the leaves fell our little village has occupied the center of the stage before an audience of millions in the great theater of congress. Our leading citizen—the chief actor—has been crowned with immortal fame. We who watched the play were thrilled by the query: Will Uncle Sam yield to temptation or cling to honor? He has chosen the latter course and we may still hear the applause in distant galleries beyond the sea. He has decided that the public revenues must be paid in honest money.

"My friend and classmate, George Bancroft, the historian, has written this letter to me out of a full heart:

"'Your fellow townsman, Silas Wright, is now the largest figure in Washington. We were all worried by the resolution of Henry Clay until it began to crumble under the irresistible attack of Mr. Wright. On the 16th he submitted a report upon it which for lucid and accurate statements presented in the most unpretending manner won universal admiration and will be remembered alike for its intrinsic excellence and for having achieved one of the most memorable victories ever gained in the United States senate. After a long debate Clay himself, compelled by the irresistible force of argument in the report of Mr. Wright, was obliged to retire from his position, his resolution having been rejected by a vote of 44 to 1.'"

With what pride and joy I heard of this great thing that my friend had accomplished!

Going out with the crowd that evening, I met Sally and Mr. and Mrs. Dunkelberg. The latter did not speak to me and when I asked Sally if I could walk home with her she answered curtly, "No, thank you."

I have got a bit ahead of my history. Soon after the opening of the new year—ten days or so later it may have been—I had begun to feel myself encompassed by a new and subtle force. It was a thing as intangible as heat but as real as fire and more terrible, it seemed to me. I felt it first in the attitude of my play fellows. They denied me the confidence and intimacy which I had enjoyed before. They whispered together in my presence. In all this I had not failed to observe that Henry Wills had taken a leading part. The invisible, inaudible, mysterious thing wrought a great change in me. It followed me through the day and lay down with me at night. I wondered what I had done. I carefully surveyed my clothes. They looked all right to me. My character was certainly no worse than it had been. How it preyed upon my peace and rest and happiness—that mysterious hidden thing!

One day Uncle Peabody came down to see me and I walked through the village with him. We met Mr. Dunkelberg, who merely nodded and hurried along. Mr. Bridges, the merchant, did not greet him warmly and chat with him as he had been wont to do. I saw that The Thing—as I had come to think of it—was following him also. How it darkened his face! Even now I can feel the aching of the deep, bloodless wounds of that day. I could bear it better alone. We were trying to hide our pain from each other when we said good-by. How quickly my uncle turned away and walked toward the sheds! He came rarely to the village of Canton after that.

May had returned—a warm bright May. I had entered my seventeenth year and the work of the term was finished.

Having nothing to do one afternoon, I walked out on the road toward Ogdensburg for a look at the woods and fields. Soon I thought that I heard the sound of galloping hoofs behind me. I looked back and I saw Sally rounding the turn by the river and coming toward me at full speed, the mane of her pony flying back to her face. She pulled up beside me just as I had imagined she would do.

"Bart, I hate somebody terribly," said she.

"Whom?"

"A man who is coming to our house on the stage today. Granny Barnes is trying to get up a match between us. Father says he is rich and hopes he will want to marry me. I got mad about it. He is four years older than I am. Isn't that awful? I am going to be just as mean and hateful to him as I can."

"I guess they're only fooling you," I said.

"No, they mean it. I have heard them talking it over.

"He cannot marry you."

"Why?"

It seemed to me that the time had come for me to speak out, and with burning cheeks I said:

"Because I think that God has married you to me already. Do you remember when we kissed each other by the wheat field one day last summer?"

"Yes."

We had faced about and were walking back toward Canton, I close by the pony's side.

"May I kiss you again?"

She stopped the pony and leaned toward me and our lips met in a kiss the thought of which makes me lay down my pen and bow my head a moment while I think with reverence of that pure, sweet spring of memory in whose waters I love to wash my spirit.

"I guess God has married us again," I declared.

"I know that you were walking on this road and I had to see you," said she. "People have been saying such terrible things."

"What?"

"They say your uncle found the pocketbook that was lost and kept the money. They say he was the first man that went up the road after it was lost."

"It's a lie—my uncle never saw the pocketbook. Some money was left to him by a relative in Vermont. That's how it happened that he bought a farm instead of going to the poorhouse when Grimshaw put the screws to him."

"I knew that your uncle didn't do it," she went on. "Father and mother couldn't tell you. So I had to."

"Why couldn't your father and mother tell me?"

"They didn't dare. Mr. Grimshaw made them promise that they would not speak to you or to any of your family. I heard them say that you and your uncle did right. Father told mother that he never knew a man so honest as your Uncle Peabody."

Just then we came upon the Silent Woman sitting among the dandelions by the roadside. She held a cup in her hand with some honey on its bottom and covered with a piece of glass.

"She is hunting bees," I said as we stopped beside her.

She rose and patted my shoulder with a smile and threw a kiss to Sally. Suddenly her face grew stern. She pointed toward the village and then at Sally.

"She means that there is some danger ahead of you," I said.

The Silent Woman picked a long blade of grass and tipped its end in the honey at the bottom of the cup. She came close to Sally with the blade of grass between her thumb and finger.

"She is fixing a charm," I said.

She smiled and nodded as she put a drop of honey on Sally's upper lip.

She held up her hands while her lips moved as if she were blessing us.

"I suppose it will not save me if I brush it off," said Sally.

We went on and in a moment a bee lighted on the honey. Nervously she struck at it and then cried out with pain.

"The bee has stung you," I said.

She covered her face with her handkerchief and made no answer.

"Wait a minute—I'll get some clay," I said as I ran to the river bank.

I found some clay and moistened it with the water and returned.

"There, look at me!" she groaned. "The bee hit my nose."

She uncovered her face, now deformed almost beyond recognition, her nose having swollen to one of great size and redness.

"You look like Rodney Barnes," I said with a laugh as I applied the clay to her afflicted nose.

"And I feel like the old boy. I think my nose is trying to jump off and run away."

We were nearing the village. She wiped the mud from her prodigious nose and I wet her handkerchief in a pool of water and helped her to wash it. Soon we saw two men approaching us in the road. In a moment I observed that one was Mr. Horace Dunkelberg; the other a stranger and a remarkably handsome young man he was, about twenty-two years of age and dressed in the height of fashion. I remember so well his tall, athletic figure, his gray eyes, his small dark mustache and his admirable manners. Both were appalled at the look of Sally.

"Why, girl, what has happened to you?" her father asked.

Then I saw what a playful soul was Sally's. The girl was a born actress.

"Been riding in the country," said she. "Is this Mr. Latour?"

"This is Mr. Latour, Sally," said her father.

They shook hands.

"I am glad to see you," said the stranger.

"They say I am worth seeing," said Sally. "This is my friend, Mr. Baynes. When you are tired of seeing me, look at him."

I shook the hand he offered me.

"Of course, we can't all be good looking," Sally remarked with a sigh, as if her misfortune were permanent.

Mr. Horace Dunkelberg and I laughed heartily—for I had told him in a whisper what had happened to Sally—while Mr. Latour looked a little embarrassed.

"My face is not beautiful, but they say that I have a good heart," Sally assured the stranger.

They started on. I excused myself and took a trail through the woods to another road. Just there, with Sally waving her hand to me as I stood for a moment in the edge of the woods, the curtain falls on this highly romantic period of my life.

Uncle Peabody came for me that evening. It was about the middle of the next week that I received this letter from Sally:

"Dear Bart: Mr. Latour gave up and drove to Potsdam in the evening. Said he had to meet Mr. Parish. I think that he had seen enough of me. I began to hope he would stay—he was so good looking, but mother is very glad that he went, and so am I, for our minister told us that he is one of the wickedest young men in the state. He is very rich and very bad, they say. I wonder if old Kate knew about him. Her charm worked well anyway—didn't it? My nose was all right in the morning. Sorry that I can't meet you Saturday. Mother and I are packing up to go away for the summer. Don't forget me. I shall be thinking every day of those lovely things you said to me. I don't know what they will try to do with me, and I don't care. I really think as you do, Bart, that God has married us to each other.

"Yours forever,

"SALLY DUNKELBERG".

How often I read those words—so like all the careless words of the young!

CHAPTER XIII.

The Bolt Falls.

Three times that winter I had seen Benjamin Grimshaw followed by the Silent Woman clothed in rags and pointing with her finger.

The trial of Amos came on. He had had "blood on his feet," as they used to say, all the way from Lickitysplit to Lewis county in his flight, having attacked and slightly wounded two men with a bowie knife who had tried to detain him at Rainy Lake. He had also shot at an officer in the vicinity of Lowville, where his arrest was effected. He had been identified by all these men, and so his character as a desperate man had been established. This in connection with the scar on his face and the tracks, which the boots of Amos fitted, and the broken gun stock convinced the jury of his guilt.

I remember well the look of the venerable Judge Cady as he pronounced the sentence of death upon Amos Grimshaw. A ray of sunlight slanting through a window in the late afternoon fell upon his gracious countenance, shining also, with the softer light of his spirit. Slowly, solemnly, kindly, he spoke the words of doom. It was his way of saying them that first made me feel the dignity and majesty of the law. The kind and fatherly tone of his voice put me in mind of that supremest court which is above all question and which was swiftly to enter judgment in this matter and in others related to it.

Slowly the crowd moved out of the courtroom. Benjamin Grimshaw rose and calmly whispered to his lawyer. He had not spoken to his son or seemed to notice him since the trial had begun, nor did he now. Many had shed tears that day, but not he. Mr. Grimshaw never showed but one emotion—that of anger. He was angry now. His face was hard and stern. He muttered as he walked out of the courtroom, his cane briskly beating the floor.

The Silent Woman—as ragged as ever—was waiting on the steps. Out went her bony finger as he came down. He turned and struck at her with his cane and shouted in a shrill voice that rang out like a trumpet in his frenzy:

"Go 'way from me. Take her away, somebody. I can't stan' it. She's killin' me. Take her away. Take her away. Take her away."

"Go 'Way From Me. Take Her Away."

His face turned purple and then white. He reeled and fell headlong, like a tree severed from its roots, and lay still on the hard, stone pavement. It seemed as if snow were falling on his face—it grew so white. The Silent Woman stood as still as he, pointing at him with her finger, her look unchanged. People came running toward us. I lifted the head of Mr. Grimshaw and laid it on my knee. It felt like the head of the stranger in Rattlerond. Old Kate bent over and looked at the eyelids of the man which fluttered faintly and were still.

"Dead!" she muttered.

Then, as if her work were finished, she turned and made her way through the crowd and walked slowly down the street. Men stood aside to let her pass, as if they felt the power of her spirit and feared the touch of her garments.

Two or three men had run to the house of the nearest doctor. The crowd thickened. As I sat looking down at the dead face in my lap, a lawyer who had come out of the courtroom pressed near me and bent over and looked at the set eyes of Benjamin Grimshaw and said:

"She floored him at last. I knew she would. He tried not to see her, but I tell ye that bony old finger of hers burnt a hole in him. He couldn't stand it. I knew he'd blow up some day under the strain. She got him at last."

"Who got him?" another asked.

"Rovin' Kate. She killed him pointing her finger at him—so."

"She's got an evil eye. Everybody's afraid o' the crazy ol' trollope."

"Nonsense! She isn't half as crazy as the most of us," said the lawyer. "In my opinion she had a good reason for pointing her finger at that man. She came from the same town he did over in Vermont. Ye don't know what happened there."

The doctor arrived. The crowd made way for him. He knelt beside the still figure and made the tests. He rose and shook his head, saying:

"It's all over. Let one o' these boys go down and bring the undertaker."

Benjamin Grimshaw, the richest man in the township, was dead, and I have yet to hear of any mourners.

Three days later I saw his body lowered into its grave. The little, broken-spirited wife stood there with the same sad smile on her face that I had noted when I first saw her in the hills. Rovin' Kate was there in the clothes she had worn Christmas day. She was greatly changed. Her hair was neatly combed. The wild look had left her eyes. She was like one whose back is relieved of a heavy burden. Her lips moved as she scattered little red squares of paper into the grave. I suppose they thought it a crazy whim of hers—they who saw her do it. I thought that I understood the curious bit of symbolism and so did the schoolmaster, who stood beside me. Doubtless the pieces of paper numbered her curses.

"The scarlet sins of his youth are lying down with him in the dust," Hacket whispered as we walked away together.

(END OF BOOK TWO.)

BOOK THREE

Which Is the Story of the Chosen Ways.

CHAPTER XIV.

Uncle Peabody's Way and Mine.

It is a bad thing to be under a heavy obligation to one's self of which, thank God, I am now acquitted. I have known men who were their own worst creditors. Everything they earned went swiftly to satisfy the demands of vanity or pride or appetite. I have seen them literally put out of house and home, thrown neck and crop into the street, as it were, by one or the other of these heartless creditors—each a grasping usurer with unjust claims.

I remember that Rodney Barnes called for my chest and me that fine morning in early June when I was to go back to the hills, my year's work in school being ended. I elected to walk, and the schoolmaster went with me five miles or more across the flats to the slope of the high country.

(Continued tomorrow)

STAYTON NEWS.

(Capital Journal Special Service.)

Stayton, Or., Jan. 17.—Ed Blakely and wife are visiting at the home of his father, W. F. Blakely. Ed was recently discharged from the army and he and his wife will make their home in Eugene, where he has a good position in a drug store.

Mrs. Sadie Smallman of Portland is helping in the care of her brother, A. C. Thomas and family, who have been sick with the flu. Mr. Thomas was quite sick for several days but is now reported gaining.

Joe Pieser, who was recently discharged from the army, is at the home of his parents north of town.

Jas. Rossell has been helping in the Lancefield shoe store for several days, doing the repair work, as Mr. Lancefield has been laid off with a sprained arm.

The wind Tuesday blew down some trees between Stayton and Kingston and also some trees in town. Telephone lines about town and in the adjoining country were badly damaged but are being repaired.

There are over 200 cases of flu reported in town, but as strict quarantine rules were put into effect Tuesday, it is expected and hoped that few new cases will be reported. Most of the cases are in a mild form, but E. D. Crabtree developed pneumonia and it is necessary to tap one of his lungs to remove the pus. He is reported getting along well.

J. P. Wilbur and wife are visiting friends in Portland.

Laurence Siegmund, who was very sick with pneumonia and taken to Salem for an operation, is now out of the hospital, and it is expected will be well enough to be brought home the last of next week.

Mr. and Mrs. W. E. Thomas of Salem have been in town the past few days, being called by the serious illness of their son, A. C.

Several men are stopping away from home these days, their families being under quarantine on account of flu.

Mr. McKinzie, an aged gentleman living south of town about three miles, died Thursday morning. He was the father of A. A. McKinzie. The burial will be in the Wisner cemetery near Kingston Friday afternoon.

Lester Frame, recently discharged from the army, is visiting at W. J. Howitt's.

Stayton is very quiet these days. Everybody who can is staying at home trying to dodge the flu.