

THE LIGHT IN THE CLEARING

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

By IRVING BACHELLER

Author of
"EVEN HOLDEN, DYN AND I, DAREL OF THE BLESSED ISLES,
KEEPING UP WITH LIZZIE, ETC., ETC."

"Soon the senator will be coming," he remarked. "I have a long letter from him and he asks about you and your aunt and uncle. I think that he's fond of you, boy."

"I wish you would let me know when he comes," I said.

"I am sure he will let you know, and, by the way, I have heard from another friend of yours, my lad. You're a lucky one to have so many friends—sure ye are. Here, I'll show ye the letter. There's no reason why I shouldn't. Ye will know its writer, probably, I do not."

So saying he handed me this letter:

"Canterbury, Vt.,
June 1.

"Dear Sir,—I am interested in the boy Barton Baynes. Good words about him have been flying around like pigeons. When school is out I would like to hear from you, what is the record? What do you think of the soul in him? What kind of work is best for it? If you will let me maybe I can help the plans of God a little. This is my business and yours. Thanking you for reading this, I am, as ever,
"God's humble servant,
"KATE FULLERTON."

"Why, this is the writing of the Silent Woman," I said before I had read the letter half through.

"Rovin' Kate?"

"Rovin' Kate; I never knew her other name, but I saw her handwriting long ago."

"But look—this is a neatly written, well-ordered letter—the sheet is as white and clean as the new snow. Unhappy woman! They say she carries the power of God in her right hand. So do all the wronged."

"I wonder why Kate is asking about me," I said.

"Never mind the reason. She is your friend and let us thank God for it. Think how she came to yer help in the old barn an' say a thousand prayers, my lad."

Having come to the first flight of the uplands, he left me with many a kind word—how much they mean to a boy who is choosing his way with a growing sense of loneliness!

I reached the warm welcome of our little home just in time for dinner. They were expecting me and it was a regular company dinner—chicken pie and strawberry shortcake.

How well I remember that hour with the doors open and the sun shining brightly on the blossoming fields and the joy of man and bird and beast in the return of summer and the talk about the late visit of Alma Jones and Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln!

While we were eating I told them about the letter of old Kate.

"Fullerton! Aunt Deel exclaimed. "Are ye sure that was the name, Bart?"

"Yes."

"Goodness gracious sakes alive!"

She and Uncle Peabody gave each other looks of surprised inquiry.

"Do you know anybody by that name?" I asked.

"We used to," said Aunt Deel as she resumed her eating. "Can't be she's one o' the Sam Fullertons, can it?"

"Oh, probably not," said Uncle Peabody. "Back East they're more Fullertons than ye could shake a stick at."

A week later we had our raising. Uncle Peabody did not want a public raising, but Aunt Deel had had her way. We had hewed and mortised and bored the timbers for our new home.

The neighbors came with pikes and helped to raise and stay and cover them. A great amount of human kindness went into the beams and rafters of that home and of others like it. I knew that The Thing was still alive in the neighborhood, but even that could not paralyze the helpful hands of those people. Indeed, what was said of my Uncle Peabody was nothing more or less than a kind of conversational firewood. I cannot think that any one really believed it.

We had a cheerful day. A barrel of hard cider had been set up in the dooryard, and I remember that some drank it too freely. The ho-ho-ee of the men as they lifted on the pikes and the sound of the hammer and beetle rang to the air from morning until night.

Mrs. Rodney Barnes and Mrs. Dorothy came to help Aunt Deel with the cooking and a great dinner was served on an improvised table in the dooryard, where the stove was set up. The shingles and sheathes and clapboard were on before the day ended.

Uncle Peabody and I put in the floors and stairway and partitions. More than once in the days we were working together I tried to tell him what Sully had told me, but my courage failed.

The day came, shortly, when I had to speak out, and I took the straight way of my duty as the needle of the compass pointed. It was the end of a summer day and we had watched the dusk fill the valley and come creeping up the slant, sinking the bowlders and their tops in its flood, one by one. As we sat looking out of the open door

that evening I told them what Sully had told me of the evil report which had traveled through the two towns.

"Damn, little souled, narrer contracted—" Uncle Peabody, speaking in a low, sad tone, but with deep feeling, cut off his highly promising opinion before it was half expressed, and rose and went to the water pail and drank.

"As long as we're honest we don't care what they say," he remarked as he returned to his chair.

"If they won't believe us, we ought to show 'em the papers—yes," said Aunt Deel.

"Thunder an' Jehu! I wouldn't go 'round the town tryin' to prove that I ain't a thief," said Uncle Peabody. "I wouldn't make no difference. They've got to have somethin' to play with. If they want to use my name for a bean bag let 'em as long as they do it when I ain't lookin'. I wouldn't wonder if they got sore hands by an' by."

I never heard him speak of it again. Indeed, although I knew the topic was often in our thoughts it was never mentioned in our home but once after that, to my knowledge.

We sat for a long time thinking as the night came on.

That week a letter came to me from the senator, announcing the day of Mrs. Wright's arrival in Canton and asking me to meet and assist her in getting the house to rights. I did so. She was a pleasant-faced, amiable woman and a most enterprising house

keeper. I remember that my first task was mending the wheelbarrow.

"I don't know what Silas would do if he were to get home and find his wheelbarrow broken," said she. "It is almost an inseparable companion of his."

The schoolmaster and his family were fishing and camping upon the river, and so I lived at the senator's house with Mrs. Wright and her mother until he arrived. What a wonderful house it was, in my view! I was awed by its size and splendor, its soft carpets and shiny brass and mahogany. Yet it was very staid.

I hoed the garden and cleaned its paths and mowed the dooryard and did some painting in the house.

The senator returned to Canton that evening on the Watertown stage. He greeted me with a fatherly warmth. Again I felt that strong appeal to my eye in his broadcloth and fine linen and beaver hat and in the splendid dignity and courtesy of his manners.

"I've had good reports of you, Bart, and I'm very glad to see you," he said. "I believe your own marks have

been excellent in the last year," I ventured.

"Poorer than I could wish. The teacher has been very kind to me," he laughed. "What have you been studying?"

"Latin (I always mentioned the Latin first), algebra, arithmetic, grammar, geography and history."

He asked about my aunt and uncle and I told him of all that had befallen us, save the one thing of which I had spoken only with him and Sully.

"I shall go up to see them soon," he said.

The people of the little village had learned that he preferred to be let alone when he had just returned over the long, wearisome way from the scene of his labors. So we had the evening to ourselves.

Mrs. Wright, being weary after the day's work, went to bed early and, at his request, I sat with the senator by the fire for an hour or so. I have always thought it a lucky circumstance, for he asked me to tell of my plans

and gave me advice and encouragement and drafted them into proper form, which I had the knack of doing rather neatly. I was impressed by the immensity of certain towns in the neighborhood, and there were some temptations in my way. Many people, and especially the prominent men, indulged in ardent spirits.

We had near us there a little section of the old world which was trying, in a half-hearted fashion, to maintain itself in the midst of a democracy. It was the manorial life of the patroons—a relic of ancient feudalism which had its beginning in 1639, when the West Indies company issued its charter of privileges and exemptions. That charter offered to any member of the company who should, within four years, bring fifty adults to the New Netherlands and establish them along the Hudson, a liberal grant of land, to be called a manor, of which the owner or patroon should be full proprietor and chief magistrate. The settlers were to be exempt from taxation for ten years, but under bond to stay in one place and develop it. In the beginning the patroon built houses and barns and furnished cattle, seed and tools. The tenants for themselves and their heirs agreed to pay him a fixed rent forever in stock and produce and, further, to grind at the owner's mill and neither to hunt nor fish.

Judge Westbrook, in whose office I worked, was counsel and collector for the patroons, notably for the manors of Livingston and Van Rensselaer—two little kingdoms in the heart of the great republic.

Mr. Louis Latour of Jefferson county who I had met in the company of Mr. Dunkelberg, came during my last year there to study law in the office of the judge, a privilege for which he was indebted to the influence of Senator Wright. I understood. He was a gay Lothario, always boasting of his love affairs, and I had little to do with him.

One day in May near the end of my two years in Cobleskill Judge Westbrook gave me two writs to serve on settlers in the neighborhood of Baldwin Heights for nonpayment of rent. He told me what I knew, that there was bitter feeling against the patroons in that vicinity and that I might encounter opposition to the service of the writs. If so I was not to press the matter, but bring them back and he would give them to the sheriff.

"I do not insist on your taking this task upon you," he added. "I want a man of fact to go and talk with these people and get their point of view. If you can't care to undertake it I'll send another man."

"I think I would enjoy the task," I said in ignorance of that hornet's nest back in the hills.

"Take Purvis with you," he said. "He can take care of the horses, and as those back-country folk are a little lawless it will be just as well to have a witness with you. They tell me that Purvis is a man of nerve and vigor."

I had drafted my letters for the day and was about to close my desk and start on my journey when Louis Latour came in and announced that he had brought the writs from the judge and was going with me.

"I wouldn't miss it for a thousand dollars," he remarked. "By Jove! I think we'll have a bully time."

"I don't object to your going but you must remember that I am in command," I said, a little taken back, for I had no good opinion either of his prudence or his company.

"The judge told me that I could go but that I should be under your orders," he answered. "I'm not going to be a fool. I'm trying to establish a reputation for good sense myself."

We got our dinners and set out soon after one o'clock. I had read the deeds of the men we were to visit. They were brothers and lived on adjoining farms with leases which covered three hundred and fifty acres of land. Their great-grandfather had agreed to pay a yearly rent forever of sixty-two bushels of good, sweet, merchantable, winter wheat, eight yearling cattle and four sheep in good flesh and sixteen fat hogs, all to be delivered in the city of Albany on the first day of January of each year. So, feeling that I was engaged in a just cause, I bravely determined to serve the writs if possible.

I rode in silence, thinking of Sully and of those beautiful days now receding into the past and of my aunt and uncle. I had written a letter to them every week and one or the other had answered it. Between the lines I had detected the note of loneliness. They had told me the small news of the countryside. How narrow and motionless it all seemed to me that Rodney Barnes had bought a new farm; John Artell had been hurt in a runaway; my white mare had got a sprain!

"Hello, mister!"

I started out of my reveries with a little jump of surprise. A big, rough-dressed, bearded man stood in the middle of the road with a gun on his shoulder.

"Where ye goin'?"

"Up to the Van Heusen place."

"Where do ye hail from?"

"Cobleskill."

"On business for Judge Westbrook?"

"Yes."

"Writes to serve?"

"Yes," I answered with no thought of my imprudence.

"Say, young man, by hokey nettle! I advise you to turn right around and go back."

"Why?"

"'Cause if ye try to serve any writs ye'll git into trouble."

"That's interesting," I answered. "I am not seeking a quarrel, but I do want to see how the people feel about the payment of their rents."

"Say mister, look down into that valley there," the stranger began. "See

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A Big, Rough Dressed, Bearded Man Stood in the Middle of the Road With a Gun on His Shoulder.

an' them houses—they're the little houses o' the poor. See how smooth the land is? Who built them houses? Who cleaned that land? Was it Mr. Livingston? By hokey nettle! I guess not. The men who live there built the houses an' cleaned the land. We ain't got nothin' else—not a dollar! It's all gone to the landlord. I am for the men who made every rod o' that land an' who own not a single rod of it. Years an' years ago a king gave it to a man who never cut one tree or laid one stone on another. The deeds say that we must pay a rent o' so many bushels o' wheat a year but the land is no good for wheat, an' ain't been for a hundred years. Why, ye see, mister, a good many things have happened in three hundred years. The land was willin' to give wheat then an' a good many folks was willin' to be slaves. By hokey nettle! they had got used to it. Kings an' magistrates an' slavery didn't look so bad to 'em as they do now. Our brains have changed—that's what's the matter—same as the soil has changed. We want to be free like other folks in this country. America has grown up around us but here we are livin' back in old Molland three hundred years ago. It don't set good. We see lots o' people that don't have to be slaves. They own their land an' they ain't worked any harder than we have or been any more savin'. That's why I say we can't pay the rents no more an' ye mustn't try to make us. By hokey nettle! You'll have trouble if ye do."

The truth had flashed upon me out of the words of this simple man. Until then I had heard only one side of the case. If I were to be the servant of justice, as Mr. Wright had advised, what was I to do? These tenants had been Grimsshawed and were being Grimsshawed out of the just fruits of their toil by the feudal chief whose remote ancestor had been a king's favorite. For half a moment I watched the wavering needle of my compass and then:

"If what you say is true I think you are right," I said.

"I don't agree with you," said young Latour. "The patroons have a clear title to this land. If the tenants don't want to pay the rents they ought to get out and make way for others."

"Look here, young man, my name is Josiah Curtis," said the stranger. "I live in the first house on the right-hand side o' the road. You may tell the judge that I won't pay rent no more—not as long as I live—and I won't git out, either."

"Mr. Latour, you and Purvis may go on slowly—I'll overtake you soon," I said.

They went on and left me alone with Curtis. He was getting excited and I wished to allay his fears.

"Don't let him try to serve no writs or there'll be hell to pay in this valley," said Curtis.

"In that case I shall not try to serve the writs. I don't want to stir up the neighborhood, but I want to know the facts. I shall try to see other tenants and report what they say. It may lead to a settlement."

We went on together to the top of the hill near which we had been standing. Far ahead I saw a cloud of dust but no signs of Latour and Purvis. They must have spurred their horses into a run. The fear came to me that Latour would try to serve the writs in spite of me. They were in his pocket. What a fool I had been to call for them. My companion saw the look of concern in my face.

"I don't like that young feller," said Curtis. "He's in fer trouble."

He ran toward his house, which was only a few rods beyond us, while I started on in pursuit of the two men at top speed. Before my horse had taken a dozen jumps I heard a horn blowing behind me and its echo in the hills. Within a half a moment a dozen horns were sounding in the valleys around me. What a contrast to the quiet in which we had been riding was this pandemonium which had broken loose in the countryside. A little ahead I could see men running out of the fields. My horse had begun to lather. The sun was hot. My companions were far ahead. I could not see the dust of their heels now. I gave up trying to catch them and checked the speed of my horse and went on at a walk. The horns were still sounding. Some of them seemed to be miles away. About twenty rods ahead I saw three riders in strange costumes come

out of a dooryard and take the road at a wild gallop in pursuit of Latour and Purvis. They had not discovered me. I kept as calm as I could in the midst of this excitement.

I passed the house from which the three riders had just turned into the road. A number of women and an old man and three or four children stood on the porch. They looked at me in silence as I was passing and then began to hiss and jeer. It gave me a feeling I have never known since that day. I jogged along over the brow of the hill when, at a white, frame house, I saw the center toward which all the men of the countryside were coming.

Suddenly I heard the hoof-beats of a horse behind me. I stopped, and looking over my shoulder saw a rider approaching me in the costume of an Indian chief. A red mask covered his face. A crest of eagle feathers circled the edge of his cap. Without a word he rode on at my side. I knew not then that he was the man Josiah Curtis—nor could I at any time have sworn that it was he.

A crowd had assembled around the house ahead. I could see a string of horsemen coming toward it from the other side. I wondered what was going to happen to me. What a shouting and jeering in the crowded dooryard! I could see the smoke of a fire. We reached the gate. Men in Indian masks and costumes gathered around us.

"Order! Sh-sh-sh," was the loud command of the man beside me in whom I recognized—or thought that I did—the voice of Josiah Curtis. "What has happened?"

"One o' them tried to serve a writ an' we've tarred an' feathered him."

Just then I heard the voice of Purvis shouting back in the crowd this impassioned plea:

"Bart, for God's sake, come here."

I turned to Curtis and said:

"If the gentleman tried to serve the writ he acted without orders and deserves what he has got. The other fellow is simply a hired man who came along to take care of the horses. He couldn't tell the difference between a writ and a hole in the ground."

"Men, you have gone far enough," said Curtis. "This man is all right. Bring the other men here and put 'em on their horses an' I'll escort 'em out o' the town."

They brought Latour on a rail amidst roars of laughter. What a bear-

like, poultry-fied, be-poodled object he was—buried and sheathed in ruffled gray feathers from his hair to his heels. The sight and smell of him scared the horses. There were tufts of feathers over his ears and on his chin. They had found great joy in spolling that aristocratic livery in which he had arrived.

Then came poor Purvis. They had just begun to apply the tar and feathers to him when Curtis had stopped the process. He had only a shaking ruff of long feathers around his neck. They lifted the runaways into their saddles. Purvis started off at a gallop, shouting "Come on, Bart," but they stopped him.

"Don't be in a hurry, young feller," said one of the Indians, and then there was another roar of laughter.

"Go back to yer work now," Curtis shouted, and turning to me added: "You ride along with me and let our feathered friends follow us."

So we started up the road on our way back to Cobleskill. Our guide left us at the town line some three miles beyond.

Latour was busy picking his arms and shoulders. Presently he took off his feathered coat and threw it away, saying:

"They'll have to pay for this. Every one o' those jackrabbits will have to settle with me."

"You brought it on yourself," I said. "You ran away from me and got us all into trouble by being too smart. You tried to be a fool and succeeded beyond your expectation."

It was dark when I left my companions in Cobleskill. I changed my clothes and had my supper and found Judge Westbrook in his home and reported the talk with Curtis and our adventure and my view of the situation back in the hills. I observed that he gave the latter a cold welcome.

"I shall send the sheriff and a posse," he said with a troubled look.

"Pardon me, but I think it will make a bad matter worse," I answered.

"We must not forget that the patroons are our clients," he remarked.

"I yielded and went on with my work

in the next week or so I satisfied myself of the rectitude of my opinions. Then came the most critical point in my history—a conflict with Thrift and Fear on one side and Conscience on the other.

The judge raised my salary. I wanted the money, but every day I would have to lead my help, directly or indirectly, to the prosecution of claims which I could not believe to be just. My heart went out of my work. I began to fear myself. For weeks I had not the courage to take issue with the learned judge.

One evening I went to his home determined to put an end to my unhappiness. After a little talk I told him frankly that I thought the patroons should seek a friendly settlement with their tenants.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because their position is unjust, un-American and untenable," was my answer.

He rose and gave me his hand and a smile of forbearance in consideration of my youth, as I took it.

I left much irritated and spent a sleepless night in the course of which I decided to cling to the ideals of David Hoffman and Silas Wright.

In the morning I resigned my place and asked to be relieved as soon as the convenience of the judge would allow it. He tried to keep me with gentle persuasion and higher pay, but I was firm. Then I wrote a long letter to my friend the senator.

Again I had chosen my way and with due regard to the compass.

CHAPTER XVI.

The Man With the Scythe.

It was late in June before I was able to disengage myself from the work of the judge's office. Meanwhile there had been blood shed back in the hills. One of the sheriff's posse had been severely wounded by a bullet and had failed to serve the writs. The judge had appealed to the governor. People were talking of "the rent war."

What a joy entered my heart when I was aboard the steambot, at last, and on my way to all most dear to me! As I entered Lake Champlain I consulted the map and decided to leave the boat at Chazy Point to find Kate Fullerton, who had written to the schoolmaster from Canterbury. My aunt had said in a letter that old Kate was living there and that a great change had come over her. So I went ashore and hired a horse of the ferryman.

I passed through Middlebury and rode into the grounds of the college, where the senator had been educated, and on out to Weybridge to see where he had lived as a boy. I found the Wright homestead—a comfortable white house at the head of a beautiful valley with wooded hills behind it—and rode up to the door. A white-haired old lady in a black lace cap was sitting on its porch looking out at the sunlit fields.

"Is this where Senator Wright lived when he was a boy?" I asked.

"Yes, sir