

# The Prodigal Village

By Irving Bacheller

## CHAPTER THREE

Which Tells of the Complaining Coin and the Man Who Lost His Self. There was a certain gold coin in a little bureau drawer in Bingville which began to form a habit of complaining to its master.

"How cold I am!" It seemed to say to the boy. "I was cold when you put me in here and I have been cold ever since. Br-r-r! I'm freezing."

Bob Moran took out the little drawer and gave it a shaking as he looked down at the gold piece.

"Don't get rattled," said the redoubtable Mr. Bloggs, who had a great contempt for cowards.

It was just after the Shepherd of the Birds had heard of a poor widow who was the mother of two small



"I Am Cold, Too," Said the Shepherd.

children and who had fallen sick of the influenza with no fuel in her house.

"I am cold, too," said the Shepherd. "Why, of course, you are," the coin answered. "That's the reason I'm cold. A coin is never any warmer than the heart of its owner. Why don't you take me out of here and give me a chance to move around?"

Things that would not say a word to other boys often spoke to the Shepherd.

"Let him go," said Mr. Bloggs. Indeed it was the tin soldier, who stood on his little shelf looking out of the window, who first reminded Bob of the loneliness and discomfort of the coin. As a rule whenever the conscience of the boy was touched Mr. Bloggs had something to say.

It was late in February, and every one was complaining of the cold. Even the oldest inhabitants of Bingville could not recall so severe a winter. Many families were short of fuel. The homes of the working folk were insufficiently heated. Money in the bank had given them a sense of security. They could not believe that its magic power would fall to bring them what they needed. So they had been careless of their allowance of wood and coal. There were days when they had none and could get none at the yard. Some men with hundreds of dollars in the bank went out into the country at night and stole rails off the farmers' fences. The homes of these unfortunate people were ravaged by influenza and many died.

Prices at the stores mounted higher. Most of the gardens had been lying idle. The farmers had found it hard to get help. Some of the latter, indeed, had decided that they could make more by teaming at Millerton than by toiling in the fields, and with less effort. They left the boys and the women to do what they could with the crops. Naturally the latter were small. So the local sources of supply had little to offer and the demand upon the stores steadily increased. Certain of the merchants had been, in a way, spoiled by prosperity. They were rather indifferent to complaints and demands. Many of the storekeepers, irritated, doubtless, by overwork, had lost their former politeness. There were days when supplies failed to arrive. The railroad service had been bad enough in times of peace. Now it was worse than ever.

Those who had plenty of money found it difficult to get a sufficient quantity of good food, Bingville being rather cut off from other centers of life by distance and a poor railroad. Some drove sixty miles to Hazelmead to do marketing for themselves and their neighbors.

Mr. and Mrs. J. Patterson Bing, however, in their luxurious apartment

at the Waldorf-Astoria hotel in New York, knew little of these conditions until Mr. Bing came up late in March for a talk with the mill superintendent. Many of the sick and poor suffered extreme privation. Father O'Neil and the Reverend Otis Singleton of the Congregational church went among the people, ministering to the sick, of whom there were many, and giving counsel to men and women who were unaccustomed to prosperity and ill-qualified wisely to enjoy it.

One day, Father O'Neil saw the Widow Moran coming into town with a great bundle of fagots on her back.

"This looks a little like the old country," he remarked.

She stopped and swung her fagots to the ground and announced: "It do that an' may God help us! It's hard times, Father. In spite o' all the in-

ey, it's hard times. It looks like there wasn't enough to go 'round—the ships be takin' so many things to the old country."

"How is my beloved Shepherd?" the good Father asked.

"Mother o' God! The house is that cold, he's been layin' abed for a week an' Judge Crooker has been away on the circuit."

"Too bad!" said the priest. "I've been so busy with the sick and the



"How is My Dear Boy?" the Good Father Asked.

lying and the dead I have hardly had time to think of you."

Against her protest he picked up the fagots and carried them on his own back to her kitchen.

He found the Shepherd in a sweater sitting up in bed and knitting socks.

"How is my dear boy?" the good Father asked.

"Very sad," said the Shepherd. "I want to do something to help and my legs are useless."

"Courage!" Mr. Bloggs seemed to shout from his shelf at the window-side and just then he assumed a most valiant and determined look as he added: "Forward! march!"

Father O'Neil did what he could to help in that moment of peril by saying:

"Cheer up, boy. I'm going out to Dan Mullin's this afternoon and I'll make him bring you a big load of wood. I'll have you at your work tomorrow. The spring will be coming soon and your flock will be back in the garden."

It was not easy to bring a smile to the face of the little Shepherd those days. A number of his friends had died and others were sick and he was helpless. Moreover, his mother had told him of the disappearance of Pauline and that her parents feared she was in great trouble. This had worried him, and the more because his mother had declared that the girl was probably worse than dead. He could not quite understand it and his happy spirit was clouded. The good Father cheered him with merry jests. Near the end of their talk the boy said: "There's one thing in this room that makes me unhappy. It's that gold piece in the drawer. It does nothing but lie there and shiver and talk to me. Seems as if it complained of the cold. It says that it wants to move around and get warm. Every time I hear of some poor person that needs food or fuel, it calls out to me there in the little drawer and says, 'How cold I am! How cold I am!' My mother wishes me to keep it for some time of trouble that may come to us, but I can't. It makes me unhappy. Please take it away and let it do what it can to keep the poor people warm."

"Well done, boys!" Mr. Bloggs seemed to say with a look of joy as if he now perceived that the enemy was in full retreat.

"There's no worse company, these days, than a hoarded coin," said the priest. "I won't let it plague you any more."

Father O'Neil took the coin from the drawer. It fell from his fingers with a merry laugh as it bounded on the floor and whirled toward the doorway like one overjoyed and eager to be off.

"God bless you, my boy! May it buy for you the dearest wish of your heart."

"Hal hal!" laughed the little tin soldier, for he knew the dearest wish of the boy far better than the priest knew it.

Mr. Singleton called soon after Father O'Neil had gone away.

"The top of the crown to you!"

he shouted, as he came into Bob's room.

"It's all right top and bottom," Bob answered cheerfully.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" the minister went on. "I'm a regular Santa Claus this morning. I've got a thousand dollars that Mr. Bing sent me. It's for any one that needs help."

"We'll be all right as soon as our load of wood comes. It will be here tomorrow morning," said the Shepherd.

"I'll come and cut and split it with you," the minister proposed. "The eloquence of the ax is better than that of the tongue these days. Meantime while I'm going to bring you a little jag in my wheelbarrow. How about beefsteak and bacon and eggs and all that?"

"I guess we've got enough to eat, thank you." This was not quite true, for Bob, thinking of the sick, whose people could not go to market, was inclined to hide his own hunger.

"Ho, ho!" exclaimed Mr. Bloggs, for he knew very well that the boy was hiding his hunger.

"Do you call that a lie?" the Shepherd asked as soon as the minister had gone.

"A little one! But in my opinion it don't count," said Mr. Bloggs. "You were thinking of those who need food more than you and that turns it square around. I call it a golden lie—I do."

The minister had scarcely turned the corner of the street, when he met Hiram Blenkinsop, who was shivering along without an overcoat, the dog Christmas at his heels.

Mr. Singleton stopped him. "Why, man! Haven't you an overcoat?" he asked.

"No, sir! It's hangin' on a peg in a pawnshop over in Hazelmead. It ain't doin' the peg any good nor me neither!"

"Well, sir, you come with me," said the minister. "It's about dinner time, anyway, and I guess you need lining, as well as covering."

The drunkard looked into the face of the minister.

"Say it ag'in," he muttered. "I wouldn't wonder if a little food would make you feel better," Mr. Singleton added.

"A little, did you say?" Blenkinsop asked.

"Make it a lot—as much as you can accommodate."

"And do you mean that ye want me to go an' eat in yer house?"

"Yes, at my table—why not?"

"It wouldn't be respectable. I don't want to be too particular, but a tramp must draw the line somewhere."

"I'll be on my best behavior. Come on," said the minister.

The two men hastened up the street followed by the dejected little yellow dog, Christmas.

Mrs. Singleton and her daughter were out with a committee of the children's helpers and the minister was dining alone that day and, as usual, at one o'clock, that being the hour for dinner in the village of Bingville.

"Tell me about yourself," said the minister as they sat down at the table.

"Myself—did you say?" Hiram Blenkinsop asked as one of his feet crept under his chair to conceal its disreputable appearance, while his dog had partly hidden himself under a serving table where he seemed to be shivering with apprehension as he peered out, with raised hackles, at the stag's head over the mantel.

"Yes."

"I ain't got any Self, sir; it's all gone," said Blenkinsop, as he took a swallow of water.

"A man without any Self is a curious creature," the minister remarked. "I'm as empty as a woodpecker's hole in the winter time. The bird has flown. I belong to this 'ere dog. He's a poor dog. I'm all he's got. If he had to pay a license on me I'd have to be killed. He's kind to me. He's the only friend I've got."

Hiram Blenkinsop riveted his attention upon an old warming-pan that hung by the fireplace. He hardly looked at the face of the minister.

"How did you come to lose your Self?" the latter asked.

"Married a bad woman and took to drink. A man's Self can stand cold an' hunger an' shipwreck an' loss o' friends an' money an' any quantity o' bad luck, take it as it comes, but a bad woman breaks the works in him an' stops his clock dead. Leastways, it done that to me!"

"She is like an arrow in his liver," the minister quoted. "Mr. Blenkinsop, where do you stay nights?"

"I've a shake-down in the little loft over the ol' blacksmith shop on Water street. There are cracks in the gable, an' the snow an' the wind blows in, an' the place is dark an' smells o' coal gas an' horses' feet, but Christmas an' I snug up together an' manage to live through the winter. In hot weather we sleep under a tree in the ol' graveyard an' study astronomy. Sometimes I wish I was there for good."

"Wouldn't you like a bed in a comfortable house?"

"No. I couldn't take the dog there an' I'd have to git up like other folks."

"Would you think that a hardship?"

"Well, ye see, sir, if ye're layin' down ye ain't hungry. Then, too, I likes to dilly-dally in bed."

"What may that mean?" the minister asked.

"I likes to lay an' think an' build air castles."

"What kind of castles?"

"Well, sir, I'm thinkin' often o' a time when I'll have a grand suit o' clothes, and a shiny silk tie on my head, an' a roll o' bills in my pocket, big enough to choke a dog, an' I'll be goin' back to the town where I was brought up an' I'll hire a team an'

you or you wouldn't be having a dream like that."

"Nobody has ever talked to me this way," poor Blenkinsop sobbed. "Nobody but you has ever treated me as if I was human."

"I know—I know. It's a hard old world, but at last you've found a man who is willing to be a brother to you if you really want one."

The poor man rose from the table and went to the minister's side and held out his hand.

"I do want a brother, sir, an' I'll do anything at all," he said in a broken voice.

"Then come with me," the minister commanded. "First, I'm going to improve the outside of you."

When they were ready to leave the house, Blenkinsop and his dog had a bath and the former was shaved and in clean and respectable garments from top to toe.

"You look like a new man," said Mr. Singleton.

"Seems like, I felt more like a proper human being," Blenkinsop answered.

Christmas was scampering up and down the hall as if he felt like a new dog. Suddenly he discovered the stag's head again and slunk into a dark corner growling.

"A bath is a good sort of baptism," the minister remarked. "Here's an overcoat that I haven't worn for a year. It's fairly warm, too. Now if your Old Self should happen to come in sight of you, maybe he'd move back into his home. I remember once that we had a canary bird that got away. We hung his cage in one of the trees out in the yard with some food in it. By and by, we found him singing on the perch in his little home. Now, if we put some good food in the cage, maybe your bird will come back. Our work has only just begun."

They went out of the door and crossed the street and entered the big stone Congregational church and sat down together in a pew. A soft light came through the great jeweled windows above the altar, and in the clear-story, and over the organ loft. They were the gift of Mr. Bing. It was a quiet, restful, beautiful place.

"I used to stand in the pulpit there and look down upon a crowd of handsomely dressed people," said Mr. Singleton in a low voice. "There is something wrong about this, I thought. There's too much respectability here. There are no flannel shirts andingham dresses in the place. I can not see half a dozen poor people. I wish there was some ragged clothing down there in the pews. There isn't an out-and-out sinner in the crowd. Have we set up a little private god of our own that cares only for the rich and respectable? I asked myself. 'This is the place for Hiram Blenkinsop and old Bill Lange and poor Lizzie Quesnelle, if they only knew it. Those are the kind of people that Jesus cared most about.' They're beginning to come to us now and we are glad of it. I want to see you here every Sunday after this. I want you to think of this place as your home. If you really wish to be my brother, come with me."

Blenkinsop trembled with strange excitement as he went with Mr. Singleton down the broad aisle, the dog Christmas following meekly. Man and minister knelt before the altar. Christmas sat down by his master's side, in a prayerful attitude, as if he, too, were seeking help and forgiveness.

"I feel better inside and outside," said Blenkinsop as they were leaving the church.

take my ol' mother out for a ride. An' when we pass by, people will be sayin': 'That's Hiram Blenkinsop! Don't you remember him? Born on the top floor o' the ol' sash mill on the island. He's a multi-millionaire an' a great man. He gives a thousand to the poor every day. Sure, he does!'"

"Blenkinsop, I'd like to help you to recover your lost Self and be a useful, respected citizen of this town," said Mr. Singleton. "You can do it if you will and I can tell you how."

Tears began to stream down the cheeks of the unfortunate man, who now covered his eyes with a big, rough hand.

"If you will make an honest effort, I'll stand by you. I'll be your friend through thick and thin," the minister added. "There's something good in

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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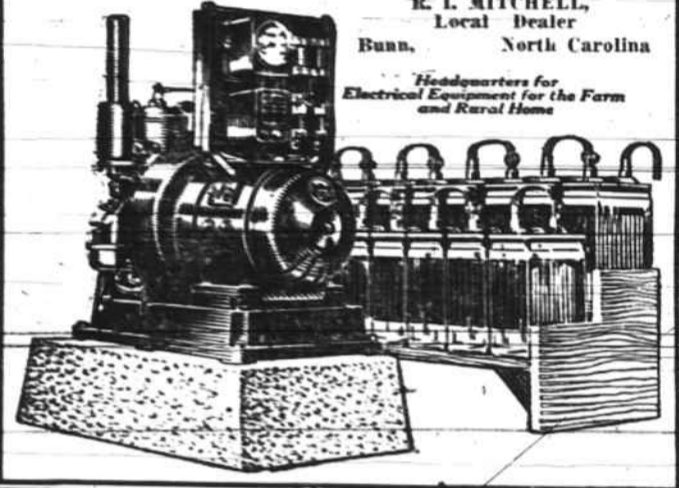
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Having qualified as Administratrix of the estate of George W. Bowden, deceased, late of Franklin County, N. C. persons holding claims against said estate are hereby notified to present the same to the undersigned on or before the 15th day of March, 1921, or this notice will be filed in bar of their recovery. All persons indebted to said estate will please come forward and make immediate settlement. This March 24th, 1921.

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3-25-21

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By virtue of the lien given by Section 2017 of the Revised of 1905, of North Carolina, to mechanics and artisans for repairs to personal property, the undersigned will, on Monday, April 11th, 1921, in front of Purnell's Garage, R. 5, Louisburg, N. C. offer for sale at public auction to the highest bidder for cash, in order to provide funds to satisfy a lien thereon for repairs made on December 7th, 1920, one Ford touring automobile, model 1917, the property of Fred Fogg—who had said repairs made. Sale about noon. This March 23rd, 1921. PERNELL'S GARAGE, A. A. Purnell, Prop'r.

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