

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.

Copyright by Irving Bacheller

CHAPTER X.

—11—

A Party and—My Fourth Peril?
It was a rainy Sunday. In the middle of the afternoon Uncle Peabody and I had set out in our spring buggy with the family umbrella—a faded but sacred implement, always carefully dried, after using, and hung in the clothes press. We were drenched to the skin in spite of the umbrella. It was still raining when we arrived at the familiar door in Ashery lane. Uncle Peabody wouldn't stop.

He hurried away. We pioneers rarely stopped or even turned out for the weather.

"Come in," said the voice of the schoolmaster at the door. "There's good weather under this roof."

He saw my plight as I entered.

"I'm like a shaggy dog that's been in swimming," I said.

I looked up at him.

"Michael Henry's clothes!—sure, they're just the thing for you!"

I followed him upstairs, wondering how it had happened that Michael Henry had clothes.

He took me into his room and brought some handsome, soft clothes out of a press with shirt, socks and boots to match.

"There, my laddie buck," said he, "put them on."

"These will soon dry on me," I said.

"Put them on—ye laggard! Michael Henry told me to give them to you. It's the birthday night o' little Ruth, my boy. There's big cake with candles and chicken pie and jellied cookies and all the like o' that. Put them on. A wet boy at the feast would dampen the whole proceedings."

I put them on and with a great sense of relief and comfort. They were an admirable fit—too perfect for an accident, although at the time I thought only of their grandeur as I stood surveying myself in the looking-glass. They were of blue cloth and I saw that they went well with my blond hair and light skin. I was putting on my collar and necktie when Mr. Hacket returned.

We went below and the table was very grand with its great frosted cake and its candles, in shiny brass sticks, and its jellies and preserves with the gleam of polished pewter among them. Mrs. Hacket and all the children, save Ruth, were waiting for us in the dining room.

"Now sit down here, all o' ye, with Michael Henry," said the schoolmaster. "The little lady will be impatient. I'll go and get her and God help us to make her remember the day."

He was gone a moment, only, when he came back with Ruth in lovely white dress and slippers and gay with ribbons, and the silver beads of Mary on her neck. We clapped our hands and cheered and, in the excitement of the moment, John tipped over his drinking glass and shattered it on the floor.

"Never mind, my brave lad—no glass ever perished in a better cause. God bless you!"

We ate and jested and talked, and the sound of our laughter drowned the cry of the wind in the chimney and the drumming of the rain upon the windows.

Next morning my clothes, which had been hung by the kitchen stove, were damp and wrinkled. Mr. Hacket came to my room before I had risen.

"Michael Henry would rather see his clothes hanging on a good boy than on a nail in the closet," said he. "Sure they give no comfort to the nail at all."

"I guess mine are dry now," I answered.

"They're wet and heavy, boy. No son o' Baldur could keep a light heart in them. Sure ye'd be as much out o' place as a sunbeam in a cave o' bats. If ye care not for your own comfort think o' the poor lad in the green chair. He's that proud and pleased to see them on ye it would be a shame to reject his offer. Sure, if they were dry ye own garments would be good enough, God knows, but Michael Henry loves the look o' ye in these togs, and then the president is in town."

That evening he discovered a big stain, black as ink, on my coat and trousers. Mr. Hacket expressed the opinion that it might have come from the umbrella, but I am quite sure that he had spotted them to save me from the last homemade suit I ever wore, save in rough work, and keep Michael Henry on my back. In any event I wore them no more save at chore time.

Sally came and went, with the Wills boy, and gave no heed to me. In her eyes I had no more substance than a ghost, it seemed to me, although I caught her often, looking at me. I judged that her father had given her a bad report of us and had some regrets, in spite of my knowledge that we were right, although they related mostly to Amos.

Next afternoon I saw Mr. Wright and the president walking back and forth on the bridge as they talked together. A number of men stood in front of the blacksmith shop, by the river shore, watching them, as I passed, on my way to the mill on an

errand. The two statesmen were in broadcloth and white linen and beaver hats. They stopped as I approached them.

"Well, partner, we shall be leaving in an hour or so," said Mr. Wright as he gave me his hand. "You may look for me here soon after the close of the session. Take care of yourself and go often to see Mrs. Wright and obey your captain and remember me to your aunt and uncle."

"See that you keep coming, my good boy," said the president as he gave me his hand, with playful reference, no doubt, to Mr. Wright's remark that I was a coming man.

"Bart, I've some wheat to be thrashed in the barn on the back lot," said the senator as I was leaving them. "You can do it Saturdays, if you care to, at a shilling an hour. Stack the straw out of doors until you've finished, then put it back in the bay. Winnow the wheat carefully and sack it and bring it down to the granary and I'll settle with you when I return."

I remember that a number of men who worked in Grimshaw's sawmill were passing as he spoke.

"Yes, sir," I answered, much elated by the prospect of earning money.

The examination of Amos was set down for Monday and the people of the village were stirred and shaken by wildest rumors regarding the evidence to be adduced. Every day men and women stopped me in the street to ask what I knew of the murder. I followed the advice of Bishop Perkins and kept my knowledge to myself.

Saturday came, and when the chores were done I went alone to the grain barn in the back lot of the senator's farm with flail and measure and broom and fork and shovel and sacks and my luncheon, in a pushcart, with all of which Mrs. Wright had provided me.

It was a lonely place with woods on three sides of the field and a road on the other. I kept laying down beds of wheat on the barn floor and beating them out with the flail until the sun was well over the roof, when I sat down to eat my luncheon. Then I swept up the grain and winnowed out the chaff and filled one of my sacks. That done, I covered the floor again and the thump of the flail eased my loneliness until in the middle of the afternoon two of my schoolmates came and asked me to go swimming with them. The river was not forty rods away and a good trail led to the swimming hole. It was a warm, bright day and I was hot and thirsty. The thought of cool waters and friendly companionship was too much for me. I went with them and stayed with them longer than I intended. I remember saying as I dressed that I should have to work late and go without my supper in order to finish my stint.

It was almost dark when I was putting the last sack of wheat into my cart, in the gloomy barn and getting ready to go.

A rustling in the straw where I stood stopped me suddenly. I heard stealthy footsteps in the darkness. I stood my ground and demanded:

"Who's there?"

I saw a form approaching in the gloom with feet as noiseless as a cat's.

It was old Kate, the woman who had been hung by the kitchen stove, who had come to me. She was in league with the gallows and could not bear to see it cheated of its prey. For some reason she hated the Grimshaws. I had seen the hate in her eyes the day she dogged along behind the old money lender through the streets of the village when her pointing finger had seemed to say to me: "There, there is the man who has brought me to this. He has put these rags upon my back, this fire in my heart, this wild look in my eyes. Wait and you will see what I will put upon him."

I knew that old Kate was not the irresponsible, witless creature that people thought her to be. I had begun to think of her with a kind of awe as one gifted above all others. One by one the things she had said of the future seemed to be coming true.

As we were going into the house the schoolmaster said:

"Now, Mary, you take this lantern and go across the street to the house of Deacon Binks, the constable. You'll find him asleep by the kitchen stove. Arrest his slumbers, but not rudely, and, when he has come to, tell him that I have news o' the devil."

Deacon Binks arrived, a fat man with a big, round body and a very wise and serious countenance between side whiskers bending from his temple to his neck and suggesting parentheses of hair, as if his head and its accessories were in the nature of a side issue. He and the schoolmaster went out of doors and must have talked together while I was eating a bowl of bread and milk which Mrs. Hacket had brought to me.

When I went to bed, by and by, I heard somebody snoring on the little porch under my window. The first sound that reached my ear at the break of dawn was the snoring of some sleeper. I dressed and went below and found the constable in his coonskin overcoat asleep on the porch with a long-barreled gun at his side.

While I stood there the schoolmaster came around the corner of the house from the garden. He put his hand on the deacon's shoulder and gave him a little shake.

She had picked up the flail, and now she put it in my hands and gave me a push toward the door. I ran, and none too quickly, for I had not gone fifty feet from the barn in the stubble when I heard them coming after me, whoever they were. I saw that they were gaining and turned quickly. I had time to raise my flail and bring it down upon the head of the leader.

I took a step backward and, seeing that it was a woman, stopped.

"It's Kate," came in a hoarse whisper as I recognized her form and staff.

"Run, boy—they have just come out o' the woods. I saw them. They will take you away. Run."

She had picked up the flail, and now she put it in my hands and gave me a push toward the door. I ran, and none too quickly, for I had not gone fifty feet from the barn in the stubble when I heard them coming after me, whoever they were. I saw that they were gaining and turned quickly. I had time to raise my flail and bring it down upon the head of the leader.

I had time to raise my flail and bring it down upon the head of the leader.

I took a step backward and, seeing that it was a woman, stopped.

"It's Kate," came in a hoarse whisper as I recognized her form and staff.

"Run, boy—they have just come out o' the woods. I saw them. They will take you away. Run."

She had picked up the flail, and now she put it in my hands and gave me a push toward the door. I ran, and none too quickly, for I had not gone fifty feet from the barn in the stubble when I heard them coming after me, whoever they were. I saw that they were gaining and turned quickly. I had time to raise my flail and bring it down upon the head of the leader.

I had time to raise my flail and bring it down upon the head of the leader.

I took a step backward and, seeing that it was a woman, stopped.

"It's Kate," came in a hoarse whisper as I recognized her form and staff.

"Run, boy—they have just come out o' the woods. I saw them. They will take you away. Run."

She had picked up the flail, and now she put it in my hands and gave me a push toward the door. I ran, and none too quickly, for I had not gone fifty feet from the barn in the stubble when I heard them coming after me, whoever they were. I saw that they were gaining and turned quickly. I had time to raise my flail and bring it down upon the head of the leader.

I had time to raise my flail and bring it down upon the head of the leader.

I took a step backward and, seeing that it was a woman, stopped.

"It's Kate," came in a hoarse whisper as I recognized her form and staff.

"Run, boy—they have just come out o' the woods. I saw them. They will take you away. Run."

She had picked up the flail, and now she put it in my hands and gave me a push toward the door. I ran, and none too quickly, for I had not gone fifty feet from the barn in the stubble when I heard them coming after me, whoever they were. I saw that they were gaining and turned quickly. I had time to raise my flail and bring it down upon the head of the leader.

I had time to raise my flail and bring it down upon the head of the leader.

I took a step backward and, seeing that it was a woman, stopped.

"It's Kate," came in a hoarse whisper as I recognized her form and staff.

"Run, boy—they have just come out o' the woods. I saw them. They will take you away. Run."

She had picked up the flail, and now she put it in my hands and gave me a push toward the door. I ran, and none too quickly, for I had not gone fifty feet from the barn in the stubble when I heard them coming after me, whoever they were. I saw that they were gaining and turned quickly. I had time to raise my flail and bring it down upon the head of the leader.

I had time to raise my flail and bring it down upon the head of the leader.

I took a step backward and, seeing that it was a woman, stopped.

"It's Kate," came in a hoarse whisper as I recognized her form and staff.

"Run, boy—they have just come out o' the woods. I saw them. They will take you away. Run."

She had picked up the flail, and now she put it in my hands and gave me a push toward the door. I ran, and none too quickly, for I had not gone fifty feet from the barn in the stubble when I heard them coming after me, whoever they were. I saw that they were gaining and turned quickly. I had time to raise my flail and bring it down upon the head of the leader.

I had time to raise my flail and bring it down upon the head of the leader.

I took a step backward and, seeing that it was a woman, stopped.

"It's Kate," came in a hoarse whisper as I recognized her form and staff.

"Run, boy—they have just come out o' the woods. I saw them. They will take you away. Run."

She had picked up the flail, and now she put it in my hands and gave me a push toward the door. I ran, and none too quickly, for I had not gone fifty feet from the barn in the stubble when I heard them coming after me, whoever they were. I saw that they were gaining and turned quickly. I had time to raise my flail and bring it down upon the head of the leader.

I had time to raise my flail and bring it down upon the head of the leader.

I took a step backward and, seeing that it was a woman, stopped.

"It's Kate," came in a hoarse whisper as I recognized her form and staff.

"Run, boy—they have just come out o' the woods. I saw them. They will take you away. Run."

She had picked up the flail, and now she put it in my hands and gave me a push toward the door. I ran, and none too quickly, for I had not gone fifty feet from the barn in the stubble when I heard them coming after me, whoever they were. I saw that they were gaining and turned quickly. I had time to raise my flail and bring it down upon the head of the leader.

I had time to raise my flail and bring it down upon the head of the leader.

I took a step backward and, seeing that it was a woman, stopped.

"It's Kate," came in a hoarse whisper as I recognized her form and staff.

"Run, boy—they have just come out o' the woods. I saw them. They will take you away. Run."

She had picked up the flail, and now she put it in my hands and gave me a push toward the door. I ran, and none too quickly, for I had not gone fifty feet from the barn in the stubble when I heard them coming after me, whoever they were. I saw that they were gaining and turned quickly. I had time to raise my flail and bring it down upon the head of the leader.

I had time to raise my flail and bring it down upon the head of the leader.

I took a step backward and, seeing that it was a woman, stopped.

"It's Kate," came in a hoarse whisper as I recognized her form and staff.

"Run, boy—they have just come out o' the woods. I saw them. They will take you away. Run."

She had picked up the flail, and now she put it in my hands and gave me a push toward the door. I ran, and none too quickly, for I had not gone fifty feet from the barn in the stubble when I heard them coming after me, whoever they were. I saw that they were gaining and turned quickly. I had time to raise my flail and bring it down upon the head of the leader.

I had time to raise my flail and bring it down upon the head of the leader.

I took a step backward and, seeing that it was a woman, stopped.

"It's Kate," came in a hoarse whisper as I recognized her form and staff.

"Run, boy—they have just come out o' the woods. I saw them. They will take you away. Run."

She had picked up the flail, and now she put it in my hands and gave me a push toward the door. I ran, and none too quickly, for I had not gone fifty feet from the barn in the stubble when I heard them coming after me, whoever they were. I saw that they were gaining and turned quickly. I had time to raise my flail and bring it down