

# The Prodigal Village

By Irving Bacheller

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manhood had given him worth having. It was the recollection of a little child which had come to his home in the first year of his married life.

"She lived eighteen months and three days and four hours," he used to say, in speaking of her, with a tender note in his voice.

Almost twenty years she had been lying in the old graveyard near the ash tree. Since then the voice of a child crying always halted his steps. It is probable that, in her short life, the neglected, pathetic child Pearl—that having been her name—had protested much against a plentiful lack of comfort and sympathy.

So Mr. Blenkinsop's agitation at the sound of a baby crying somewhere near him, in the darkness of the old graveyard, was quite natural and will be readily understood. He rose on his elbow and listened. Again he heard the small, appealing voice.

"By thunder! Christmas," he whispered. "If that ain't like Pearl when she was a little, teeny, weeny thing no bigger'n a pint o' beer! Say, it is, sir, sure as sin!"

He scrambled to his feet, suddenly, for now, also, he could hear the voice of a woman crying. He groped his way in the direction from which the sound came and soon discovered the woman. She was kneeling on a grave with a child in her arms. Her grief touched the heart of the man.

"Who be you?" he asked. "I'm cold, and my baby is sick, and I have no friends," she sobbed. "Yes, ye have," said Hiram Blenkinsop. "I don't care who ye be, I'm yer friend and don't ye forget it."

There was a reassuring note in the voice of Hiram Blenkinsop. Its gentleness and its a quiver of sympathy. She felt it and gave to him, an unknown, invisible man, with just a quiver of sympathy in his voice—her confidence.

If ever one was in need of sympathy, she was at that moment. She felt that she must speak out to someone. So keenly she felt the impulse that she had been speaking to the stars and the cold grave-stones. Here at last was a human being with a quiver of sympathy in his voice.

"I thought I would come home, but when I got here I was afraid," the girl moaned. "I wish I could die." "No, ye don't, either!" said Hiram Blenkinsop. "Sometimes, I've thought that I hadn't no friends an' wanted to die, but I was just foolin' myself. To be sure, I ain't had no baby on my hands but I've had somethin' just as worrisome, I guess. Folks like you an' me has got friends a-plenty if we'll only give 'em a chance. I've found that out. You let me take that baby an' come with me. I know where you'll get the glad hand. You just come right along with me."

The unmistakable note of sincerity was in the voice of Hiram Blenkinsop. She gave the baby into his arms. He held it to his breast a moment, thinking of old times. Then he swung his arms like a cradle saying: "You stop your hollerin'—ye got darn little skeezucks! It ain't decent to go on that way in a graveyard an' ye ought to know it. Be ye tryin' to wake up the dead?"

The baby grew quiet and finally fell asleep. "Come on, now," said Hiram, with the baby lying against his breast. "You an' me are goin' out o' the past. I know a little house that's next door to heaven. They say ye can see heaven from its windows. It's where the good Shepherd lives. Christmas an' I know the place—don't we, ol' boy? Come right along. There ain't no kind o' doubt o' what they'll say to us."

The young woman followed him out of the old graveyard and through the dark, deserted streets until they came to the cottage of the Widow Moran. They passed through the gate into Judge Crooker's garden. Under the Shepherd's window, Hiram Blenkinsop gave the baby to his mother and with his hands to his mouth called "Bob!" in a loud whisper. Suddenly a robin sounded his alarm. Instantly, the Shepherd's room was full of light. At a moment, he was at the window sweeping the garden paths and the tree tops with his searchlight. It fell on the sorrowful figure of the young mother with the child in her arms and stopped. She stood looking up at the window bathed in the flood of light. It reminded the Shepherd of that glow which the wise men saw in the manger at Bethlehem.

"Pauline Baker!" he exclaimed. "Have you come back or am I dreaming? It's you—thanks to the Blessed Virgin! It's you! Come around to the door. My mother will let you in."

It was a warm welcome that the girl received in the little home of the Widow Moran. Many words of comfort and good cheer were spoken in the next hour or so, after which the young woman made the bed and tucked

rolled a chop and served them in the Shepherd's room.

"God love yer child! So he was a married man—bad 'cess to him no' the likes o' him!" she said as she came in with the tray. "Mother o' Jesus! What a wicked world it is!"

The prudent dog Christmas, being afraid of babies, hid under the Shepherd's bed, and Hiram Blenkinsop lay down for the rest of the night on the lounge in the cottage kitchen.

An hour after daylight, when the judge was walking in his garden, he wondered why the widow and the Shepherd were sleeping so late.

### CHAPTER SEVEN.

In Which High Voltage Develops in the Conversation.

It was a warm, bright May day. There was not a cloud in the sky. Roger Delane had arrived and the Bings were giving a dinner that evening. The best people of Hazelmead were coming over in motorcars. Phyllis and Roger had a long ride together that day on the new Kentucky saddle horses. Mrs. Bing had spent the morning in Hazelmead and had stayed to lunch with Mayor and Mrs. Stacy. She had returned at four and cut some flowers for the table and gone to her room for an hour's rest when the young people returned. She was not yet asleep when Phyllis came into the big bedroom. Mrs. Bing lay among the cushions on her couch. She partly rose, tumbled the cushions into a pile and leaned against them.

"Heavens! I'm tired," she exclaimed. "These women in Hazelmead hang onto one like a lot of hungry cats. They all want money for one thing or another—Red Cross or Liberty bonds or fatherless children or tobacco for the soldiers or books for the library. My word! I'm broke and it seems as if each of my legs hung by a thread."

Phyllis smiled as she stood looking down at her mother. "How beautiful you look!" the fond mother exclaimed. "If he didn't propose to-day, he's a chump."

"But he did," said Phyllis. "I tried to keep him from it, but he just would propose in spite of me."

The girl's face was red and serious. She sat down in a chair and began to remove her hat. Mrs. Bing rose suddenly, and stood facing Phyllis. "I thought you loved him," she said with a look of surprise.

"So I do," the girl answered. "What did you say?" "I said no."

"I refused him!" "For God's sake, Phyllis! Do you think you can afford to play with a man like that? He won't stand for it."

"Let him go for it then, and mother, you might as well know first as last, that I am not playing with him."

There was a calm note of firmness in the voice of the girl. She was prepared for this scene. She had known it was coming. Her mother was hot with irritating astonishment. The calmness of the girl in suddenly beginning to dig a grave for this dear ambition—rich with promise—in the very day when it had come submissively to their feet, stung like the tooth of a serpent. She stood very erect and said with an icy look in her face:

"You young upstart! What do you mean?" "There was a moment of frigid silence in which both of the women began to turn cold. Then Phyllis answered very calmly as she sat looking down at the bunch of violets in her hand:

"It means that I am married, mother."

Mrs. Bing's face turned red. There was a little convulsive movement of the muscles around her mouth. She folded her arms on her breast, lifted her chin a bit higher, and asked in a polite tone, although her words fell like fragments of cracked ice:

"Married! To whom are you married?" "To Gordon King."

Phyllis spoke casually as if he were a piece of ribbon that she had bought at a store.

Mrs. Bing sank into a chair and covered her face with her hands for half a moment. Suddenly she picked up a slipper that lay at her feet and flung it at the girl.

"My God!" she exclaimed. "What a nasty liar you are!" "It was not ladylike but, at that moment the lady was temporarily absent."

"Mother, I'm glad you say that," the girl answered still very calmly, although her fingers trembled a little as she felt the violets, and her voice



"Married! To Whom Are You Married?"

was not quite steady. "It shows that I am not so stupid at home as I am at school."

The girl rose and threw down the violets and her mild and listless manner. A look of defiance filled her face and her figure. Mrs. Bing arose, her eyes aglow with anger.

"I'd like to know what you mean," she said under her breath. "I mean that if I am a liar, you taught me how to be it. Ever since I was knee-high, you have been teaching me to deceive my father. I am not going to do it any longer. I am going to find my father and tell him the truth. I shall not wait another minute. He will give me better advice than you have given, I hope."

The words had fallen rapidly from her lips and, as the last one was spoken, she hurried out of the room. Mrs. Bing threw herself on the couch where she lay with certain bitter memories, until the new maid came to tell her that it was time to dress.

She was like one reminded of mortality after coming out of other.

"Oh, Lord!" she murmured wearily. "I feel like going to bed! How can I live through that dinner? Please bring me some brandy."

Phyllis learned that her father was at his office, whither she proceeded without a moment's delay. She sent in word that she must see him alone and as soon as possible. He dismissed the men with whom he had been talking and invited her into his private office.

"Well, girl, I guess I know what is on your mind," he said. "Go ahead."

Phyllis began to cry. "All right! You do the crying and I'll do the talking," he went on. "I feel like doing the crying myself, but if you want the job, I'll resign it to you. Perhaps you can do enough of that for both of us. I began to smell a rat the other day. So I sent for Gordon King. He came this morning. I had a long talk with him. He told me the truth. Why didn't you tell me? What's the good of having a father unless you use him at times when his counsel is likely to be worth having? I would have made a good father, if I had had half a chance. I should like to have been your friend and confidant in this important enterprise. I should have been a help to you. But, somehow, I couldn't get on the board of directors, and your mother have been running the plant all by yourselves and I guess it's pretty near bankrupt. Now, my girl, there's no use crying over spilt tears. Gordon King is not the man of my choice, but we must all take hold and try to build him up. Perhaps we can make him pay."

"I do not love him," Phyllis sobbed.

"You married him because you wanted to. You were not coerced?" "No, sir."

"I'm sorry, but you'll have to take your share of the crow with the rest of us," he went on, with a note of sternness in his tone. "My girl, when I make a contract I live up to it and I intend that you shall do the same. You'll have to learn to love and cherish this fellow, if he makes it possible. You and your mother believe in woman's rights. I don't object to that, but you mustn't think that you have the right to break your agreements unless there's a good reason for it. My girl, the marriage contract is the most binding and sacred of all contracts. I want you to do your best to make this one a success."

There was the tinkle of the telephone bell. Mr. Bing put the receiver to his ear and spoke into the instrument as follows:

"Yes, she's here! I knew all the facts before she told me. Mr. Delane? He's on his way back to New York. Left on the six-ten. Charged me to present his regrets and farewells to you and Phyllis. I thought it best for him to know and to go. Yes, we're coming right home to dress. Mr. King will take Mr. Delane's place at the table. We'll make a clean breast of the whole business. Brace up and eat your crow with a smiling face. I'll make a little speech and present Mr. and Mrs. King to our friends at the end of it. Oh, now, cut out the sobbing and leave this un-

finished business to me and don't worry. We'll be home in three minutes."

### CHAPTER EIGHT.

In Which Judge Crooker Delivers a Few Opinions.

The pride of Bingville had fallen in the dust! It had arisen and gone on with soiled garments and lowered head. It had suffered derision and defeat. It could never be the same again. Sneed and Snodgrass recovered, in a degree, from their feeling of opulence. Sneed had become polite, industrious and obliging. Snodgrass and others had lost heavily in stock speculation through the failure of a broker in Hazelmead. They went to work with a will and without the haughty independence which, for a time, had characterized their attitude. The spirit of the Little Shepherd had entered the hearts and home of Emanuel Baker and his wife. Pauline and the baby were there and being tenderly loved and cared for. But what humility had entered that home! Phyllis and her husband lived with her parents, Gordon having taken a humble place in the mill. He worked early and late. The Bings had made it hard for him, finding it difficult to overcome their resentment but he stood the gaff, as they say, and won the regard of J. Patterson, although Mrs. Bing could never forgive him.

In June, there had been public meetings in the town hall addressed by Judge Crooker and the Reverend Mr. Singleton. The judge had spoken of the grinding of the mills of God that was going on the world over.

"Our civilization has had its time of trial not yet ended," he began. "Its enemies have been busy in every city and village. Not only in the cities and villages of France and Belgium have they been busy, but in those of our own land. The Goths and Vandals have invaded Bingville. They have been destroying the things we loved. The false god is in our midst. Many here, within the sound of my voice, have a god suited to their own tastes and sins—an obedient, tractable, homeless god. It is my deliberate opinion that the dances and costumes and moving pictures we have seen in Bingville are doing more injury to civilization than all the guns of Germany. My friends, you can do nothing worse for my daughter than deprive her of her modesty and I would rather, far rather, see you slay my son than destroy his respect for law and virtue and decency."

"The jazz band is to me a sign of spiritual decay. It is a step toward the jungle. I hear it in the beating of the tom-tom. It is not music. It is the barbaric yawn of sheer recklessness and daredevilism, and it is everywhere."

"Even in our economic life we are dancing to the jazz band with utter recklessness. American labor is being more and more absorbed in the manufacture of luxuries—embroidered frocks and elaborate millinery and limousines and the landaulets and rich upholstery and cord tires and golf courses and sporting goods and great country houses—so that there is not enough labor to provide the comforts and necessities of life."

"The tendency of all this is to put the stamp of luxury upon the commonest needs of man. The time seems to be near at hand, when a boiled egg and a piece of buttered bread will be luxuries and a family of children an unspendable extravagance. Let us face the facts. It is up to Vanity to moderate its demands upon the industry of man. What we need is more devotion to simple living and the general welfare. In plain old-fashioned English we need the religion and the simplicity of our fathers."

Later, in June, a strike began in the big plant of J. Patterson Bing. The men demanded higher pay and shorter days. They were working under a contract but that did not seem to matter. In a fight with "scabs" and Pinkerton men they destroyed a part of the plant. Even the life of Mr. Bing was threatened! The summer was near its end when J. Patterson Bing and a committee of the labor union met in the office of Judge Crooker to submit their differences to that impartial magistrate for adjustment. The judge listened patiently and rendered his decision. It was accepted.

When the papers were signed, Mr. Bing rose and said, "Your honor, there's one thing that I want to say. I have spent most of my life in this town. I have built up a big business here and doubled the population. I have built comfortable homes for my laborers and taken an interest in the education of their children, and built a library where anyone could find the best books to read. I have built playgrounds for the children of the working people. If I have heard of any case of need, I have done my best to relieve it. I have always been ready to hear complaints and treat them fairly. My men have been generously paid and yet they have not hesitated to destroy my property and to use guns and knives and clubs and stones to prevent the plant from filling its contracts and to force their will upon me. How do you explain it? What have I done or failed to do that has caused this bitterness?"

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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NOTICE TO TAX LISTERS

I will be at the following place in Cedar Rock township on the dates named for the purpose of taking the taxes for 1921. All persons in said township are notified to meet me at one of the above places on the date mentioned:

W. O. Stone's Store, Friday May 6th.  
J. O. May's Store, Saturday May 7th and Saturday, May 28th.  
Able Bowden's Store, Friday, May 13th.  
Justice, Saturday, May 4th and Thursday, May 26th.  
J. B. Sturdivant's Store, Friday, May 20th.  
T. H. Dicken's Store, Saturday, May 21st and Friday, May 27th.  
Murray's Store, Wednesday, May 25th.  
J. O. SLEDGE, Tax List Taker, 4-29-1f. Cedar Rock Township.

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