

The Prodigal Village

By Irving Bacheller

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CHAPTER SIX.

In Which Hiram Blenkinsop Has a Number of Adventures.

The Shepherd of the Birds had caught the plague of influenza in March and nearly lost his life with it. Judge Crooker and Mr. and Mrs. Singleton and their daughter and Father O'Neil and Mrs. Ames and Hiram Blenkinsop had taken turns in the nursing of the boy. He had come out of it with impaired vitality.

The rubber tree used to speak to him in those days of his depression and say, "It will be summer soon."

"Oh, dear! But the days pass so slowly," Bob would answer with a sigh.

Then the round nickel clock would say cheerfully, "I hurry them along as fast as ever I can."

"Seems as if old Time was losing the use of his legs," said the Shepherd. "I wouldn't wonder if some one had run over him with an automobile."

"Everybody is trying to kill Time these days," ticked the clock with a merry chuckle.

Bob looked at the clock and laughed. "You've got some sense," he declared. "Nonsense!" the clock answered.

"You can talk pretty well," said the boy.

"I can run, too. If I couldn't, nobody would look at me."

"The more I look at you the more I think of Pauline. It's a long time since she went away," said the Shepherd. "We must all pray for her."

"Not I," said the little pine bureau. "Do you see that long scratch on my side? She did it with a harpin when I belonged to her mother, and she used to keep her dolls in my lower drawer."

Mr. Blazes assumed a look of great alertness, as if he spied the enemy. "What's the use of worrying?" he quoted.

"You'd better lie down and cover yourself up or you'll never live to see her or the summer either," the clock warned the Shepherd.

Then Bob would lie down quickly and draw the clothes over his shoulders and sing of the Good King Wen-



"Oh Dear! But the Days Pass So Slowly!" Bob Would Answer With a Sigh.

ceslas and The First Noel, which Miss Betsy Singleton had taught him at Christmas time.

All this is important as showing how a poor lad, of a lively imagination was wont to spend his lonely hours. He needed company and knew how to find it.

Christmas day, Judge Crooker had presented him with a beautiful copy of Raphael's Madonna and Child.

"It's the greatest theme and the greatest picture this poor world of ours can boast of," said the Judge. "I want you to study the look in that mother's face, not that it is unusual. I have seen the like of it a hundred times. Almost every young mother with a child in her arms has that look or ought to have it—the most beautiful and mysterious thing in the world. The light of that old star which led the wise men is in it. I sometimes think, Study it and you may hear voices in the sky as did the shepherds of old."

So the boy acquired the companionship of those divine faces that looked down at him from the wall near his bed and had something to say to him every day.

Also, another friend—a very humble one—had begun to share his confidence. He was the little yellow dog, Christmas. He had come with his master, one evening in March, to spend a night with the sick Shepherd. Christmas had lain on the foot of the bed and felt the loving caress of the boy. The heart of the world, that loves above all things the touch of a kindly hand, was in this little creature. Often, when Hiram was walking out in the bitter winds, Christmas would edge away when his master's back was turned. In a jiffy, he was out of sight and making with all haste for the door of the Widow Moran. There, he never failed to receive some token of the generous woman's understanding of the great need of dogs—a bone or a doughnut or a slice of bread soaked in meat gravy—and a warm welcome from the boy above stairs. The boy always had time to pet him and play with him. He was never fooling the days away with an ax and a saw in the cold wind. Christmas admired his master's ability to pick up logs of wood and leave them about and to make a great deal of noise with an axe but, in cold weather, all that was a bore to him. When he had been missing, Hiram Blenkinsop found him, always, on Bob Moran's bed.

May had returned with its warm sunlight. The robins had come back. The blue martins had taken possession of the bird house. The grass had turned green on the garden borders and was now sprinkled with the golden glow of dandelions. The leaves were coming but Pat Crowley was no longer at work in the garden. He had fallen before the pestilence. Old Bill Rutherford was working there. The Shepherd was at the open window every day, talking with him and watching and feeding the birds.

Now, with the spring, a new feeling had come to Mr. Hiram Blenkinsop. He had been sober for months. His Old Self had come back, and had imparted his youthful strength to the man Hiram. He had money in the bank. He was decently dressed. People had begun to respect him. Every day, Hiram was being mislaid and worried by a new thought. It persisted in telling him that respectability was like the Fourth of July—a very dull thing unless it was celebrated. He had been greatly pleased with his own growing respectability. He felt as if he wanted to take a look at it, from a distance, as it were. That money in the bank was nudging and calling him. It seemed to be lonely and longing for companionship.

"Come, Hiram Blenkinsop," it used to say. "Let's be off together and get a silk hat and a gold-headed cane and make 'em set up and take notice. Suppose you should die sudden and leave me without an owner?"

The warmth and joy of the spring had turned his fancy to the old dream. So one day, he converted his bank balance into "a roll big enough to choke a dog," and took the early morning train to Hazlewood, having left Christmas at the Widow Moran's.

In the mill city he bought a high silk hat and a gold-headed cane and a new suit of clothes and a boiled shirt and a high collar and a red necktie. It didn't matter to him that the fashion and fit of his garments were not quite in keeping with the silk hat and gold-headed cane. There were three other items in the old dream of splendor—the mother, the prancing team, and the envious remarks of the onlookers. His mother was gone. Also there were no prancing horses in Hazlewood, but he could hire an automobile.

In the course of his celebration he asked a lady whom he met in the street, if she would kindly be his mother for a day. He meant well but the lady being younger than Hiram and not accustomed to such familiarity from strangers, did not feel complimented by the question. They fled from each other. Soon, Hiram bought a big custard pie in a bake-shop and had it cut into smallish pieces and, having purchased pie and plate, went out upon the street with it. He ate what he wanted of the pie and generously offered the rest of it to sundry people who passed him. It was not impertinence in Hiram; it was pure generosity—a desire to share his riches, flavored, in some degree, by a feeling of vanity. It happened that Mr. J. Patterson Wenz came along and received a tender of pie from Mr. Blenkinsop. "No!" said Mr. Bing, with that old hammer whack in his voice which aroused bitter memories in the mind of Hiram.

That tone was a great piece of impudence. There was a menacing gesture and a rapid succession of footsteps on the pavement. Mr. Bing's retreat was not, however, quite swift enough to save him. The pie landed on his shoulder. In a moment, Hiram was arrested and marching toward the lockup while Mr. Bing went to the nearest drug store to be cleaned and scoured.

A few days later Hiram Blenkinsop arrived in Binyville. Mr. Singleton met him on the street and saw to his deep regret that Hiram had been drinking.

"I've made up my mind that religion is good for some folks, but it won't do for me," said the latter.

"Why not?" the minister asked.

"I can't afford it."

"Have you found religion a luxury?" Mr. Singleton asked.

"It's grand while it lasts, but it's like 'pison gettin' over it," said Hiram. "I feel kind o' ruined."

"You look it," said the minister, with a glance at Hiram's silk hat and soiled clothing. "A long spell of sobriety is hard on a man if he quits it sudden. You've had your day of trial, my friend. We all have to be tried soon or late. People begin to say, 'At last he's come around all right. He's a good fellow.' And the Lord says: 'Perhaps he's worthy of better things. I'll try him and see.'"

"That's His way of pushing people along, Hiram. He doesn't want them to stand still. You've had your trial and failed, but you mustn't give up. When your fun turns into sorrow, as it will, come back to me and we'll try again."

Hiram sat dozing in a corner of the bar-room of the Eagle hotel that day. He had been ashamed to go to his comfortable room over the garage. He did not feel entitled to the hospitality of Mr. Singleton. Somehow, he couldn't bear the thought of going there. His new clothes and silk hat were in a state which excited the



Hiram Sat Dozing in a Corner of the Bar-Room of the Eagle Hotel That Day.

desires of small boys and roditic comment from all observers while he had been making his way down the street. His money was about gone. The barkeeper had refused to sell him any more drink. In the early dusk he went out of doors. It was almost 's warm as midsummer and the sky was clear. He called at the door of the Widow Moran for his

dog. In a moment Christmas came down from the Shepherd's room and greeted his master with fond affection. The two went away together. They walked up a deserted street and around to the old graveyard. When it was quite dark, they groped their way through the weedy, briared aisles, between moss-covered tripping stones, to their old nook under the ash tree. There Hiram made a bed of boughs, picked from the evergreens that grew in the graveyard, and lay down upon it under his overcoat with the dog Christmas. He found it impossible to sleep, however. When he closed his eyes a new thought began nudging him.

It seemed to be saying, "What are you going to do now, Mr. Hiram Blenkinsop?"

He was pleased that it seemed to say Mr. Hiram Blenkinsop. He lay for a long time looking up at the starry moonlit sky, and at the marble, weather-spotted angel on the monument of the Reverend Thaddeus Sneed, who had been lying there, among the rude forefathers of the village, since 1806. Suddenly the angel began to move. Mr. Blenkinsop observed with alarm that it had discovered him and that its right forefinger was no longer directed toward the sky but was pointing at his face. The angel had assumed the look and voice of his Old Self and was saying:

"I don't see why angels are always cut in marble an' set up in graveyards with nothing to do but point at the sky. It's a cold an' lonesome business. Why don't you give me a job?"

His Old Self vanished and, as it did so, the spotted angel fell to coughing and sneezing. It coughed and sneezed so loudly that the sound went echoing in the distant sky and so violently that it reeled and seemed to be in danger of falling. Mr. Blenkinsop awoke with a rude jump so that the dog Christmas barked in alarm. It was nothing but the midnight train from the south pulling out of the station, which was near the old graveyard. The spotted angel stood firmly in place and was pointing at the sky as usual.

It was probably an hour or so later, when Mr. Blenkinsop was awakened by the barking of the dog Christmas. He quieted the dog and listened. He heard a sound like that of a baby crying. It awoke tender memories in the mind of Hiram Blenkinsop. One very sweet recollection was about all that the barren, bitter years of his young 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 had in it 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 some one. So keenly she felt the impulse that she had been speaking to the stars and the cold gravestones. 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. Bolts 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 up' come with me. I know where you'll get the good bread. You just come right along with me."

The dimpled, note of shyness 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 assuaged his sense like a cradle saying:

"You stop your bolterin'—ye gold-darn little scoonies! It ain't decent to go on that way in a graveyard an' ye ought to know it. He ye tryin' to waken 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 his windows. It's where the good Shepherd lives. Christmas an' I know the place—don't ye, 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 its 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. In 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 'round 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 good woman made tea and toast and broiled a chop and served them in the Shepherd's room.

"God love ye, child! So he was a married man—bad 'cess to him an' 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 fables, 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.

(To be continued.)

NOTICE OF SALE.
The entire stock of goods of the Crowell Variety Store, bankrupt, including the fixtures, is offered for sale by the undersigned trustee.
Bids will be received not later than 12 o'clock M., August 15th, 1921.
Will be glad to show any one interested the inventory of stock of goods and fixtures, and will take them to store and let them inspect goods and fixtures. Terms of sale cash.
W. O. LEMMOND, Trustee.

NOTICE
It is resolved by the Board of Aldermen of the City of Monroe, N. C., that the Sanitary Department of the City remove the trash and rubbish placed in receptacles on the edge of the sidewalks in the mornings of the days for the several wards as follows:
Ward One, on Mondays of each week.
Ward Two, on Tuesdays of each week.
Ward Three, on Wednesdays of each week.
Ward Four, on Thursdays of each week.
Ward Five, on Fridays of each week.
On Saturdays the general business section of the City.
Please see that all trash around your premises is placed in a receptacle on the days for your ward and do not expect the wagon on other days. If you will co-operate with us we will clean up the City.
Respectfully,
W. J. TRULL,
Chairman Sanitary Committee.

Dr. Kemp Funderburk
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NOTICE OF SALE.
By virtue of the power of sale contained in a mortgage deed executed on the 7th day of April, 1916, to W. E. Williams by A. Lincoln and wife, and duly recorded in the office of Register of Deeds for Union County, N. C., in book A. M., on page 441, default having been made in the payment of the obligation therein secured, the undersigned assignee will sell at public auction at the courthouse door in Monroe, Union County, N. C., to the highest bidder for cash, at 12 o'clock noon, on

Saturday, September 3rd, 1921, the following described piece or parcel of land, lying and being in said county and state, near the N. E. confines of the City of Monroe, bounded and described as follows: Beginning at the S. E. point of the intersection made by Jerome Avenue and Boyte street and runs with said Avenue S. 86 E. 145 feet to a stake at alley; thence with western edge of said alley S. 24 W. 50 feet to a stake, corner of Lot No. 14, Block 5; thence with the northerly boundary of Lot No. 14 aforementioned, N. 86 W. 145 feet to a stake in the eastern edge of Boyte street; thence with eastern edge of Boyte street N. 34 E. 50 feet to the beginning, containing 50 by 145 feet square and being Lot No. 13 in Block 5 as shown on the registered plot of Vann Heights addition to the City of Monroe, property sold by Monroe Realty Co., conveyed by said company to Lee Griffin by deed dated 11th Oct., 1909, recorded in Registry of said county in Book 42, page 518, and conveyed by said Griffin and wife to said Abraham Lincoln by deed dated April 5, 1919. Sold to satisfy provisions of said mortgage deed.
This August 3, 1921.
THE BANK OF UNION, Assignee.