

ADONIRAM

Charles Boardman Hawes

In the Public Domain

Adoniram sat on a rafter in the long shed and cocked his left eye. Mr. Ballin sat in the ancient armchair under the apple tree and dozed in the afternoon sun.

With an unpleasant rattle of wheels, a carriage, moving in a brown cloud of dust, came down toward the lake. Adoniram shook his wings, cocked his right eye, and squawked as only a solemn crow, well assured of kind treatment and a comfortable living, can squawk. Roused by the sound, Mr. Ballin straightened up and slapped vigorously at a large fly, which buzzed away unharmed.

“I vum, I thought I’d caught the pesky critter!” Mr. Ballin mumbled sleepily.

He saw the carriage on the road, and scanned it through narrowed lids. It was an old carriage, worn and decrepit; the wheels wobbled; the leather on the cushions was broken. The lean, loose-jointed nag plodded along at an awkward gait. In the carriage sat an old man with a thin, white beard and a lean, sad face. He stared straight ahead at the Marsh’s red barn, which stood under the oak at the fork of the roads. He seemed not to know that there was any human being in sight. The gaunt horse shambled away, the cloud of dust rolled down the road toward the pond, and Adoniram squawked a parting salute. “Be still!” thundered Mr. Ballin, glaring vindictively at the crow.

Adoniram made curious gurgles in his throat and flopped solemnly to the ground. Standing directly under Mr. Ballin’s veined, bony hand, he drooped his wings. Mr. Ballin smiled, and with one finger scratched Adoniram’s black, shiny head. The crow gurgled his thanks and rolled his eyes.

“Nelson Holbrook ain’t thrivin’, be he, Adoniram?” the old man said in a voice in which sympathy and vindictiveness mingled strangely. “No, sir, he ain’t. That hoss ain’t more’n half fed, and that wagon is jest about to pieces.”

Mr. Ballin gazed thoughtfully down the road toward the bend where the old wagon had disappeared; then he looked up the road, toward Richmond, under the edge of Bear’s Den Mountain, where he could see a gray gable among the green trees. It was the house where Nelson Holbrook had lived for seventy-three years. Nelson Holbrook’s grandfather had built that house long ago—in the days when rumors of

an Indian raid still had the power to load every gun in the Ashuelot Valley. Sixty years before, Mr. Ballin and Nelson Holbrook had passed many afternoons climbing over that gabled roof.

Old Man Ballin, scratching Adoniram's head, thought of those boyhood days; he could remember them in every detail. He remembered the cold fall days, when huge yellow pumpkins lay in the stubble of the cornfields; the sharp, white days, when the horses picked their way through the feathery drifts, and when the setting sun cast long blue shadows on the dry snow; the brown, wet days in April, when the brook flowed over the meadows; the warm, sunny days in June, when darting trout would twitch the end of a bamboo pole. The figure of Nelson Holbrook always appeared in the picture that flitted across Mr. Ballin's mind.

At last Mr. Ballin's thoughts took him to a dark, stormy evening in September, the evening when he and Nelson had quarreled. Then the old man's face set, his eyes grew a little harder, his lips met more firmly, and he turned from the gray gable to watch the green meadows. Through them the bent figure of his neighbor, Samuel Dennis, was picking its way.

Mr. Ballin scratched Adoniram's head, and his face softened a little as he whispered to that intelligent bird, "Yes, sir, I mistrust Holbrook's havin' a hard time of it; he ain't lookin' as perky as he used to."

Samuel Dennis came up toward the house, and passed on the road with a cheery "Good day!" He carried a long fishpole from which hung a gray line that was still wet. A square tail protruded from the pocket of his coat, and Mr. Ballin felt a little resentful that the man should be fishing that fine afternoon; he half wished he had gone himself. But he was still sleepy, and so he merely called out, "Howdy, Sam'!" and leaned back in the old chair.

Samuel went on up the road, and Mr. Ballin knew that he intended to fish downstream from the bridge. It was a wonderful afternoon. Mr. Ballin almost made up his mind to go fishing himself; but the sun was warm, and the chair was comfortable, and before he had fully decided he was asleep.

Mr. Ballin did not like Samuel. Samuel was too officious, a mere boy of fifty-five or sixty who had no business to be so "come-uppish"; and besides, Samuel went fishing with Nelson Holbrook. Mr. Ballin had passed them one day below the bridge, and it was always awkward to pass Nelson Holbrook, even after all these years. Mr. Ballin was sure that in the matter of that old dispute he had been right, yet his conscience troubled him a little.

Mr. Ballin did not see a wisp of smoke behind Bear's Den. He leaned back in his chair and slept. He dreamed that he was lying in the deep grass by the brook watching for the flicker of the pole. He felt a sharp little jerk, the line cut through the

water as he lifted the pole, and a little, gleaming, wriggling shape lay on the grass beside him. The thing was brown on top and golden on the belly, and it had speckled sides that shimmered in the sunlight. “Well done, a good un!” a voice cried. It was Nelson Holbrook’s voice.

Mr. Ballin wondered how Nelson Holbrook had happened to be in the meadow, and then he wondered in a vague, dreamy way how Nelson Holbrook happened to speak to him.

Something hit Mr. Ballin’s hand, and he stirred a little, blinked, and stared. The sun was much lower; the breeze had quickened. While Mr. Ballin was wondering how he happened to wake up, Adoniram actually pecked his hand. When the old man looked at him in open-eyed reproof, Adoniram squawked loudly and hoarsely.

“Be still, you pesky fowl!” Mr. Ballin shouted, angry at his rude awakening.

Adoniram squawked again, not once but three times.

Mr. Ballin ran his fingers through his hair and wrinkled his forehead. Adoniram must be disciplined. Mr. Ballin’s eyes searched the yard for a small stick or “likely” switch, but the yard was well raked and none was in sight. In the kitchen Mr. Ballin could hear his daughter, Sarah, singing as she worked. Somewhere beyond the hills a dog was barking furiously. Adoniram, still squawking, flopped up into the apple tree. Mr. Ballin’s dog, Major, listened to the distant barking dog, pricked up his ears, and ran down to the road, where he began to howl.

Mr. Ballin was puzzled.

Adoniram cawed loudly and flew to Mr. Ballin’s feet. An odd light was in the bird’s wise, crafty eyes. First Adoniram looked up at Mr. Ballin; then he looked toward Bear’s Den Mountain. Mr. Ballin looked at Adoniram, and then he, too, looked toward Bear’s Den Mountain.

Mr. Ballin opened his eyes very wide. He got up from his chair and stood breathless.

“I vum!” he muttered. “I’m dum glad of it!”

Then he thought of the broken leather on the seat of Nelson Holbrook’s buggy and of the sad look in Nelson Holbrook’s eyes. A great wave of pity surged over him, and he felt something of the affection that he had had for Nelson Holbrook years ago, before there had been any foolish quarrel.

Mr. Ballin left the crow and the apple tree, the house and the barn. He turned a little clumsily, and ran up the road toward the bridge as fast as his old legs could carry him. His white hair stuck out in every direction; his white moustache bristled. His thumping feet raised little clouds of dust; his legs, in their checkered blue overalls, pumped like piston rods. In his youth Mr. Ballin had been a runner of great renown, and he now disappeared between the alders at a speed that astonished Adoniram. He

looked up at the blue sky, looked at the little white house, and then, after winking one eye, flopped down the road in pursuit of his master.

Happening to look out of the window, Sarah saw her father's sudden departure. In amazement, she dropped her flat-iron and ran to the door. Her heart leaped with horror, for she saw rising by Bear's Den Mountain a lofty column of black, ominous smoke, and under it darting scarlet flames.

Samuel Dennis, lying at full length by a deep pool below the bridge, was angling with infinite patience for a certain trout that had three times stolen his bait. Suddenly he heard a shrill outcry. Raising his head, he stared at the road with startled eyes. His mouth opened and his heart leaped. Mr. Ballin, the silver-haired, kindly-faced Nestor of all Swanzey, was running up the road like a racer on the home stretch.

"Fire!" the old man shouted as he ran.

At that very moment there was a rush and a splash in the brook, and the bamboo rod ducked spasmodically; but Samuel had seen Mr. Ballin's crimson face. Leaving the largest trout in Ballin Brook twitching his fishpole, he stumbled through the brake, clambered up to the road, and with pumping arms and puffing breath, lumbered in the wake of Mr. Ballin, who had already disappeared beyond the pines ahead.

As Mr. Ballin ran through the dust in the heat of that summer afternoon, he felt a strong reaction against the impulse that had led him to make so strong an effort in behalf of a man who had become his enemy. Then he thought of that sad, pinched look on Nelson Holbrook's face, and the lean, emaciated appearance of the horse he drove. Setting his teeth, the old man labored on with aching lungs and parched throat.

"Fire! Fire!" he yelled; and Nathan Handy came running from the barn at the crossroads.

"Fire! Fire!"

Jimmy Bowles dropped his hoe, and came leaping over the trim rows of blossoming peas.

"Fire! Fire!"

Cyrus Nash and his two sons rushed from the carpenter shop by the stone watering trough.

They came with a will, strong men and young men; but ahead of them all flashed the white hair and the blue overalls of a very old man who ran as if the days of his youth had come back to him again.

The Holbrook barn was hidden by sheeted flames. Tongues of fire were licking up the dead grass and devouring the rail fences; the leaves of the apple trees were wilted and withered; the clapboards of the house were scorched and blackened. Smoke

arose from a dozen charred patches. Every window was shut tight and the doors were bolted. The house was deserted. Confusion swelled round the conflagration as the men came rushing in, but from the midst of the tumult arose a quavering old voice in shrill command. The word was good; they listened and obeyed.

The barn was gone beyond all hope, and they left it to its fate.

With a rail they rammed down the door of the house; they broke into the dairy, and tossed out pails, pails, pails—milk pails, lard pails, water pails, scrubbing pails, and sugar buckets. More men came rushing across the fields and down through the orchard. Someone telephoned the alarm to West Swanzey, East Swanzey, Middletown, and Winchester. They formed a line from the well to the house; and down the line, hand over hand, they passed brimming pails. Then, louder than the roar of the flames, louder than the din of falling timbers, louder than the shouting and the tumult, rose the voice of Old Man Ballin. He had gone up the ell like a monkey. He perched on the ridge-pole, where gray smoke eddied round his silver hair, and gave orders like a captain in a conning tower. He it was that saw the glimmer of fire along the gutter on the side of the roof away from the crowd. Flinging himself out flat on the hot shingles, he crawled down, and with his bare hands beat at the flames until water thrown from below snuffed out the danger.

Old Man Ballin did not think where he was or what it all meant. He forgot all that had happened in the years past; he was carried back to old days and old friendships; he realized only that Nelson Holbrook's house must not burn.

The barn crashed down and the wind threw flaming shingles on the roof of the house. Mr. Ballin scrambled over the steeply slanting eaves and tossed the burning shingles off with hands already blistered. A little flame ran along the grass and ate into one corner of the ell. The warning voice of Old Man Ballin shrilled loud on the June air, and a score of men swarmed to the rescue. And it was he that directed the attack on the burning shed, which threatened the south ell of the house.

Men were coming in carriages and on foot. From West Swanzey, East Swanzey, Middletown, and Winchester they came through dust and heat, grimy and breathless. Bringing hose reel, hand engine, and bucket brigade, still they came. Then the wind turned directly from the burning ruins of the barn toward the house, and ten feet of wall burst into flame. Water thrown from below fell short, and every man's heart sank with dread. For more than a hundred years the Holbrook house had been a gray landmark on the hillside; for more than a hundred years it had stood for kindly fellowship and true hospitality. It was no secret that of late Nelson Holbrook had been having a hard pull of it. At that moment, when it seemed that every attempt to save his house must fail, Mr. Ballin crawled down the steep shingles, and bracing his feet in the gutter, hauled off his clean blue shirt. Tying it to his forearm, he leaned

low and beat at the burning boards. Smoke obscured his eyesight and choked his lungs; his arm was old and feeble; his strength was failing fast. Time and again a flame flared up as if to defy the old man. Some of the men ran for ladders; some swarmed up the roof in fierce but unavailing effort. When help reached him, Mr. Ballin leaned wearily back and eyed a great charred blotch that had ceased even to smoke.

Then the fire engine from East Swanzey came through the dust behind galloping horses. A thin stream of water curved through the air and splashed on the gray gables. The column of smoke died down to a faint wisp that lingered as if loath to leave the ruins of the barn.

Mr. Ballin looked down at the crowd; he looked at his own burned hands; he was tired—dead tired. His white head drooped a little; his moustache was burned and discolored. But as he sat there on the ridgepole, it all seemed so strangely familiar.

Stiffly and painfully Mr. Ballin was lowering himself from his lofty perch, when he heard a loud rattle beyond the row of trees that hid the bend of the road. Mr. Ballin looked, and saw behind a gaunt old horse with reeking hide and distended nostrils, a rattling, shabby old carriage. The panting horse stopped beside the house, and Nelson Holbrook, letting the reins fall from his hands, leaned over the dashboard and gazed with wide eyes, in which tears of thanksgiving trembled, at the house that had been saved from the flames.

Amid the clamor of a dozen voices that tried to tell him of the conflagration, Nelson Holbrook stared at the gray house that his father's father had built so many years before. He saw the scorched clapboards and the fire-stained shingles; he saw the burned grass and the fence along which the fire had eaten its way to the ell; he saw Mr. Ballin's smoke-stained face and blistered hands, but of that he gave no sign.

Moved by a sudden desire to avoid a scene where so many were chattering volubly to each other, Mr. Ballin slipped round the corner of the house. No one saw him go. He limped; his hands were sore; he felt dizzy and confused.

Strangely enough, he could not help thinking of those other days when he had clambered over the Holbrook house and basked in the sun, when he and some one else lay full length on the warm, comfortable shingles. Somehow Mr. Ballin felt alone in the world. He heard behind him a horse's steps and the rattle of a carriage; but he did not look up, because he was ashamed that his eyes were misty. He stepped out of the road to let the carriage go by, but the carriage stopped.

An unfamiliar, familiar voice spoke to him: "Bill—Bill, will ye take a lift?"

Mr. Ballin turned in surprise. The gray eyes of the man in the carriage were no clearer than his own. Mr. Ballin climbed into the buggy, and the gaunt horse shambled wearily on.

“Bill,” said the unfamiliar, familiar voice, that ignoring his seventy-two years, addressed him as if he were only a boy, “Bill, I hear tell there’s good trouting in Roaring Muddy Brook. Let’s hitch up old Nell tomorrow real early and go down together for the day. What do ye say to that?”

Mr. Ballin cleared his throat. It was with relief that he found he could control his voice. “I vum, Nelson, that’s a good idee!” The old man smiled with a strange feeling of peace and security. “And seein’ your barn’s burnt,” he continued, “you jest better put Nell in mine fer the time bein’; it ain’t so fur but you can walk home.”

There was a sudden flutter of wings, and a large black bird that had been hopping sedately in the dust flew through the air and lighted on Mr. Ballin’s shoulder. Mr. Ballin reached up a forefinger and affectionately scratched its head. “And seein’ Maria’s not back yet,” he continued shyly, “you better jes’ stay to supper. I cal’late Sarah’ll have plenty.”

Then Adoniram cocked one eye and squawked triumphantly at Sarah Ballin, who stood by the little white house and watched the two old men riding side by side in the ancient buggy.