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OUR BENNY



MARY E. WALLER



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OUR BENNY

OUR BENNY

BY

MARY E. WALLER

Author of "The Wood-carver of 'Lympus'"



BOSTON

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TO
THE PEOPLE OF ILLINOIS AND KENTUCKY
IN MEMORY OF
ABRAHAM LINCOLN

DIVISIONS OF THE POEM

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PEOPLE OF THE POEM

GRANTHER

HANNAH, HIS DAUGHTER

BENNY, HER SON

AGATHA, HER NIECE

THE PARSON

THE DOMINIE

THE MILLER

Time, MARCH — APRIL, 1865

Place, A VILLAGE IN VERMONT

I

THE COMING OF THE LETTER

OUR BENNY

I

THE COMING OF THE LETTER

“STRANGE how the frosts of our winter
get into the bones of us old folks!

Here I be nigh on to eighty, yet play second
fiddle to no one,

When, in the height of the summer, I work
side by side with the reapers,

Or, later on, at the huskin' I fill the deep
bins near to burstin'.

Let it come freezin' o' nights though, an'
thawin' right smart every midday,

OUR BENNY

Let a crow call from the woodlot an' sap
freely run from our maples,
Then, as I sit by the fire a-nursin' my
knees in the gloamin',
Suddenly falleth the hoar-frost an' chills
me clean through to the marrow.
Hannah, 'tis then that I envy our boy on
the distant Potomac."
Thereupon answered the housewife, and
turned to look over her shoulder
Toward the old Windsor chair and the
yet sturdy form patriarchal:
" Really, father, I think you would shoulder
my granther's old musket,
Were you but three score and ten, and be
off to the war with our Benny,
Just for the purpose of saying you still hold
your own with the young folks."

THE COMING OF THE LETTER

Lightly she spoke, but the tears were nearer
the surface than laughter;

Sighing she kneaded her loaves, while
drowning her sighs in a clatter —

Rattling the pans and the bread-tray and
making to-do out of nothing,

Thinking to cover her woe from the keen,
watchful eyes of her father.

Quickly perceiving her wile, he bespoke her
both gently and wisely:

“ Surely to-night brings a letter; I’m
thinkin’ he’ll have much to tell us:

News from headquarters direct an’, per-
haps, of the inauguration.

Likely enough our good parson an’, mebbe,
the teacher’ll drop in here

Soon as they know, for a certain, we’ve had
our first letter from Benny.

OUR BENNY

Agatha'll spread the good news much
faster'n a bush fire can travel —
Seems if I heard her a-comin'; it sounds
like her foot on the gravel."

Then of a sudden the door, with creaking
and strain of its hinges,
Opened full width in the kitchen and let
in the chill wind of springtime;
Let in the feeble white sunshine and, with
it, so fresh in her beauty,
Glowing in radiant youth and warm with
the quick blood of girlhood,
Agatha, waving the letter and crying aloud
her rejoicing:
" Oh, dear Aunt Hannah, it's come! —
And now you will breathe again freely.

THE COMING OF THE LETTER

See it, how pudgy and fat! — like a manuscript, leastwise it feels so;

Parson and dominie both are coming to share in our pleasure,

Even the miller was saying — ” But here the old man interrupted:

“ Agatha, ever your tongue, like a mill-clapper runneth unceasin’,

Deafenin’ when one would listen. Come, Hannah, make haste with the readin’.”

Into the face of the mother flashed joy and anticipation

Trembling in firmly-set lips and quivering long in the eyelids.

Carefully over the bread-board — ’twas laden with loaves for the rising —

OUR BENNY

Snowy white linen she folded with somewhat elaborate caution —

Seeking more strength in deception and time to control her emotion.

“Now we will read it,” she said, and, taking her seat on the settle,

Opened it; laid on the cushions each sheet of the close-written letter,

Till from the innermost leaflet, there fluttered two three-cornered missives.

Mother was written on one (the paper beneath showed a blister),

Agatha's own was the other; 'twas laden with scent of the jasmine.

Close in her toil-worn hand, the mother guarded her message;

Agatha, biding her time, thrust hers, when unseen, in her bosom.

THE COMING OF THE LETTER

Then with expectance the three, with
 smiles and words of approval,
Read, each in turn, the epistle — thrice
 over in special instalments;
Noting a quip now and then, a description
 of places or people,
Marking a page for the parson, a para-
 graph, too, for the miller;
Reading again and again, until dusk over-
 taken; then lamplight
Gleamed from the windows adown the
 steep highroad that leads to the village.

“ Beats all how Benny remembers,” said
 Granter, rising abruptly,
“ Nary a neighbor forgotten throughout
 our Green Mountain village,

OUR BENNY

Women, nor children, nor girls, nor man —
nor beast, for that matter!

Here I be settin' around, a-gawpin' an'
starin' at nothin' ;

Nary a chore have I done, an' the hens
gone to roost 'fore 'twas sundown;

Brindle an' Bessie unmilked an' a-lowin'
to beat all creation.

Nary a stick in the woodbox, Hannah, an'
cookin' an' bakin'

Goin' on just afore supper — it beats all, I
say, how forgetful

Eighty has made me!" He reached for the
milkpails, down-turned on the dresser,

Reached for the stout wooden yoke, hanging
slack from a hook in the corner,

Muttering still, as he passed to the wood-
shed where hung the old lantern,

THE COMING OF THE LETTER

Fretfully over his chores; he was wearied
with all the unwonted
Fusion of thought and of feeling, occasioned
by Benny's first letter.

Smiling, the girl and the woman turned each
to her home occupation:

Agatha laying the table and Hannah pre-
paring the supper.

Well could they both understand, for hearts
can most surely interpret,

Plaint and vexation alike; they gave to his
loneliness voice.

Out in the barn and the barnyard the
octogenarian pothered,

Making his usual rounds among the sheep
and the cattle;

OUR BENNY

Giving to each and to all the provident
 food and the bedding,
Speaking to one and another as if the dumb
 brutes were mere humans
Instinct with love and devotion, with courage
 and loyal persistence.
Flashing his lantern, he went, athwart the
 wide stalls and the mangers
Where stood the deep-breathing cattle, the
 horses nosing their fodder ;
Looked at the emptying hay-mows, and
 wondered whether the harvest,
Filling with plenty the barn, would reach
 this year to the rafters ;
Fastened the doors for the night and,
 barring the gate of the sheep-pen,
Stood for a moment thereafter, his wrinkled
 forehead uplifted,

THE COMING OF THE LETTER

Feeling the way of the wind; he scented the
big thaw impending.

Slowly he turned to the farmhouse and
entered the old-fashioned kitchen,
Cheerful with lamplight and fire, and
fragrant with bread from the oven.

II
SALUS PATRIAE

II

SALUS PATRIAE

“ NOT in the seats of the mighty, nor yet in
the chambers of council

Find we the sources, the well-springs, of
national life and its leadings.

No, but on high in the mountains, on water-
sheds' forested ridges;

No, but abroad on the prairies where root-
lets of corn spring the earth-clods;

No, but deep down in the cisterns, beneath
the rough breakage of subsoil —

There we may find the true sources, the
feeders of public opinion,

OUR BENNY

Varied in sound and in form as the steam
and the rain and the crystal;
All of an essence the three, yet different
as to expression, —
Coming from furrow and glebeland, the
quarry, the mine, and the furnace —
Each in itself so benign when subserving
the national welfare.”

Thus to his friends spoke the parson, when,
climbing the hill-road together
Up toward the clear-shining lamplight that
sent forth its beam from the farmhouse,
Miller and dominie, both, began in a mood
disputatious,
Freely to air their opinions on subjects of
greatest importance,

SALUS PATRIAE

Waxing full wroth, as they talked, with the
Government, laws, and their makers.
Then 'twas the parson protested, and, laying
a hand on each shoulder,
Utterance gave to these words which re-
called them to sense and to reason.
Well did he know his companions — their
angles and humors and crotchets —
Knew them and loved them right well, for
sound to the core was the kernel.

Straightway the miller made answer, “ ’Tis
true; I confess your words shame me;
Ever I’m mixin’ my chaff with the wheat of
our good constitution,
Ever forgettin’ that I, too, uphold it and
share with all others

OUR BENNY

That which has been to our country as
bread of life to the livin'.

Often I laugh to myself, as I picture the
mill-wheels of Congress

Grindin' away at the laws we home folks
must furnish the grist for,

Yes, and the water-power both — without
gettin' thanks for it either!

Still you are right 'bout the 'feeders'; I
see plain enough what's my duty:

'Thirty-two quarts to the bushel; the old
mill kep' at it a-goin'

Right through the twenty-four hours, as long
as the boys need the fodder.

Ben, now — ” He stopped, with his foot on
the scraper, to listen intently, —

“ Hark, what a voice! like a bird's; a
thrush gives us nothin' much sweeter.

SALUS PATRIAE

Surely all's well with our Benny, or Agatha
wouldn't be singin'.

When she has finished we'll give a surprise,
and call for a — What is 't?

What do you call it?" "An encore," the
dominie answered; "Now listen!"

*Thy mountain peaks, dear Land, shall
brighten*

*With freedom's fires from sea to sea,
The shadows in thy valleys lighten
Till all the world shall look to thee.*

*Thy bastioned mountains stand like towers
To guard our homes from sea to sea;
Thy Freedom's watchmen call the hours,
And bid us hope eternally.*

OUR BENNY

*We hope! — The dawn of freedom breaketh
O'er all the earth from sea to sea;
Thou art the pioneer who maketh,
Dear Land, a home for all the free.*

Baring their heads, and in silence, the
dominie, parson, and miller
Listened just under the window; they feared
to lose of that message
Even a word, for it spoke to their patriot
hearts, and emotion
Momently held them in thrall. The song
died away in the kitchen.
Followed a resonant knock, a scraping and
stamping of cowhides,
Echoed at once by a joyful "Oh!" and
within a commotion;

SALUS PATRIAE

Wide flew the door to admit them; the
welcome was triune that met them.

“Come for that letter of Ben’s, eh? ’Tis
well worth the climb from the village.
Agatha, draw up the chairs. I’ll set right
here on the settle —

Never a better place made to discuss the
affairs of the nation,

Also this letter from Benny. Come, Han-
nah, produce the epistle.

Agatha, set here by me and read ’bout the
inauguration.”

Thus spoke the grandsire, rejoicing, renew-
ing his youth in the present

Pride and delight in his grandson, who
“kept up the name” of his fathers:

OUR BENNY

Seven generations of men, the sinew and
bone of New England!

Proudly the girl read the lines about the
inaugural message:

“ ‘ Oh, had you seen him, dear people of
mine, as he stood there, bareheaded,
Facing the throng that had filled all the
Capitol’s eastern approaches!

Could you have heard him deliver that mes-
sage so fraught with deep meaning —
Wisdom condensed of the ages, at least,
so it seemed at that moment.

Black was the square beneath him; close-
pressed stood the thousands of people;
Every face was upturned and every eye was
on Lincoln.

Black overhead in the heavens the cloud-
wrack was scudding to southward,

SALUS PATRIAE

Blotting the sunshine from sight and casting
a gloom universal.

Oh, how the listening people were longing
just then for an omen,

Promise of light and of life — a symbol of
“health for our nation,”

(Dominie knows what I mean), when, just
as he spoke those immortal

Words for all ages: *With malice towards
none*, the cloud-wrack in flying

Parted, and through the deep rift a sunbeam
glanced straight as an arrow

Slantwise on Lincoln's bare head, and rested
thereon for a second.

Oh, 'twas a joy to us all! A sigh, like the
wind through our pine trees,

Rose to the lips of those thousands and
breathed itself forth as a prayer —

OUR BENNY

Would you had lived it! Oh, mother, that moment was worth being born for! ’’

Only the click of the needles, as Hannah kept on with her knitting, Made itself heard in the silence. Agatha broke it: “ Now, listen! Here is a message for you; ” she turned to the dominie leaning Forward and half off his chair — he was nursing first one knee then t’other: — “ ‘ Tell my dear dominie pal that, at night, when I’m out doing sentry, Nearly asleep and dead-tired from digging all day the entrenchments, Often I spout to myself half a hundred lines of old Homer —

SALUS PATRIAE

Tell him I'll bet three to one he knows
what's my favorite passage;
Little he thought it would help me to keep
wide-awake on my sentry!"

"He's got the grit, though, our Benny,"
the grandsire chuckled approving;

"Back in his boyhood he slept like a log,
and hard 'twas to wake him.

Many a time I've seen Hannah a-sousin'
his face with cold water!"

"Luckily Ben was a student," the dominie
spoke midst the laughter;

"Took to his Greek just as easy as ever a
duck takes to water;

Latin he made just a play of, and fought
through all Caesar's great battles

OUR BENNY

Over and over again with the boys till they
struck, and declared

Roundly to me they would play at recess
no longer with Caesar."

Twirling the key on his watch-chain — the
symbol of Phi Beta Kappa —

Thoughtful he grew as he added: "This key
stands for power through attainment;
Made for a lock that will open the door to
earnest endeavor.

Many a time the boy asked me to give him
the real explanation,

Wherefore the letters *S P* — he was curious
as to their meaning.

'Wait, only wait,' I would say, 'until you
yourself shall have worn it,

Then you will know' — but, ah me! even
now he is valiantly learning

SALUS PATRIAE

All its significant beauty of truth, through
a deed sacrificial,

Learning the values of life and of living,
by doing his duty.

Hannah, I envy your boy down there on
the distant Potomac."

Thereupon answered the mother, while
pausing a moment in knitting:

"No need to envy my boy. Who can say
where to-night he is sleeping?

Not as you think by that river. See, here,
in a postscript he tells us:

'Monday we move farther southward.'
Just look at the date of this letter

Written full two weeks ago, and delayed all
this time in deliv'ry!

OUR BENNY

Who can foresee what has happened meanwhile?" She took up her knitting.

"Never say die!" cried the miller, thus hoping, in his way, to cheer her;

"Long as we've got Abram Lincoln, this nation won't go to perdition.

He'll see us through in good season, he and our staunch Constitution;

Both on 'em sound to the core, nor rust nor mildew can blight 'em. . . .

Speak to her, parson," he whispered, "console her with words of assurance."

"Hannah," the parson said gently, "I fear I can speak but cold comfort
Unto your motherly heart — we men can never be mothers;

SALUS PATRIAE

But let me say what I feel, that out of this
struggle and trial —

Death-throes or birth-throes, whichever they
may be, these weeks must deter-
mine —

We, you and I, indeed all, our brothers in
arms, and our country,

Northland and Southland alike, shall issue
the nobler the better,

Ready with hand and with heart to further
our national welfare.

Benny is doing his share right manfully, as
it behooves him —

Hannah, the rest we will leave with Him
whose time is not ours.”

“ That makes me think,” said the dominie,
fumbling about in his pockets,

OUR BENNY

Ransacking notebook and wallet, "I've
written a few lines expressing
Something to that same effect — and it may
be you might like to hear them?"

Promptly the miller responded: "Out with
it! I know it's worth hearin'."

Then with a diffident "Hem!" as a prep-
aration for reading,

Holding the sheet neath the lamplight, he
said, half apologetic:

"Rhythm and rhyme should agree I
acknowledge both fully and frankly;

Shifting of accents, indeed, I never permit
to my pupils

Nor to myself; only once in a while I
make an exception

When a good rhyme, that I like, falls sac-
rifice to an idea — "

SALUS PATRIAE

“Come, that’s enough!” cried the miller;
“it’s just the idees that we’re
wantin’.”

Smiling, the dominie read to his audience
small, but approving:

*America, thy praise I sing!
Thy brawny arms the blessings bring
Of love and life and loyalty:
They fell the forest, blast the hill,
They pile the granite, fill the till,
They dig and delve with right good will—
The very pledge of loyalty.
Nor shall thy brows remain uncrowned;
We sing thy praise the wide earth round.*

*But when these hands to toil inured
From out the scabbard draw the sword*

OUR BENNY

*To "seek for peace in liberty";
Then let the stroke be quick and strong
That right may ever conquer wrong,
That might may ne'er make right, so long
As men "seek peace in liberty."
When brothers' strength with brothers'
 mates,
The blood that floweth consecrates.*

*Ay, consecrates this Land of ours
To nobler use of nobler powers
For service to Humanity.
The sword to ploughshare shall be ground,
And earth with plenty shall abound,
The mine shall yield the whole year round
In service to Humanity;
And brain, and muscle, hand, and heart,
Each do for thee, our Land, its part.*

SALUS PATRIAE

“That’s the right ring,” cried the miller;
and “Good!” said the parson, “we’ll
print it.”

Agatha, woman-like, flattered the poet by
begging a copy,

Saying she’d send it to Benny as part of
the lengthy round-robin

Ready to go on the morrow from all his
young friends and well-wishers.

Hannah alone made no comment, but ever
her needles clicked faster,

Proof of an inward excitement and feelings
that needed expression.

Stopping a moment in order to count up her
stitches in “heeling,”

Knitting and needles she dropped in her
lap; and her heart, overburdened,

OUR BENNY

Vented itself in her words that rushed forth
in a surcharge of feeling:

“ What can you know, all you men, what we
women, we mothers must suffer ?

What to a woman bereft, is glory, or fame,
or ambition ?

Often, before Benny left me, I used to lie
hour after hour

Sleepless from sorrow and trouble — my
heart was like lead in my bosom

Just at the thought of those others, those
mothers afar in the Southland,

Women who've given their all, their hus-
bands, their sons and their brothers,

Even as we who have sacrificed that which
is drawn from our life's blood.

Only 'tis worse for our sisters, those stricken
ones down in the Southland,

SALUS PATRIAE

Caught in the whirlpool of war, all its waves
and its billows pass o'er them.

Many a hearthstone is cold, the mistress
and children in hiding;

Many a lintel is sprinkled with blood, but no
passover Angel

Spareth the darling firstborn! And while
at the North we're in safety,

Many a battle is fought, almost, as it were,
at their thresholds.

Oh, they are heroines all! and sore is my
heart with their bruising,

Dreadful, too dreadful their fate — Oh, I
don't understand it!" Appealing

Straight to the parson she spoke: "How
can you, how can you explain it?"

Think of the prayers that are rising at this
very minute to heaven!

OUR BENNY

All this great country of ours like a Rachel,
forlorn among nations,
Mourneth uncomforted day after day, and
the sound of her wailing
Filleth the earth. Yes, from dark until
dawn, from morning till evening
Women are crying to Him for their loved
ones, for help, for deliv'rance,
Wrestling in anguish of soul as once they
have wrestled in body
When a strong man-child they bore in
pain and convulsion of travail —
Bore him for this! Oh, I tell you it almost
makes me a sceptic . . . ”

“ Hannah, my daughter, be still,” said her
father, commanding, yet pleading;

SALUS PATRIAE

“ Benny would go like the others; the rest
is 'twixt him and his Maker.

Surely 'tis in the boy's blood; he's descended
from three generations

Ready to fight for their country if only peace
was the issue.

Look! here's the musket I carried when
fightin' the British at Plattsburg;

See on the wall just above it my granther's
old flintlock; he bore it

When for the birth of this nation he gave
both his life and his substance,

Fought in the patriot ranks — yes, fought
till he fell there, a hero

Fightin' on patriot soil, the soil of our dear
old Virginny!

Agatha, fetch me the button — 'tis in the tin
box on the dresser —

OUR BENNY

See, here the arms of Great Britain, a
remnant of coat with the button :

Grandfather's father's, 'twas worn when he
fell at Quebec, duly cherished

Year after year by his children, and children
of three generations.

Chip of the old block is Benny; what's bred
in the bone, you know, Hannah — ”

“ Yes, yes, I know,” she made answer
impatient, while lighting her candle;

“ Know it far better than you, for my heart
is filled with foreboding — ”

Quickly she bade them good-night; her
step could be heard on the stairway

Laggard and heavy, for trouble was weight-
ing her feet as it weighted

Leaden her motherly heart that was seeking
in vain for some comfort.

SALUS PATRIAE

Smiling, indulgent, her father appealed to
his guests just departing:

“ That is the way with all women, God bless
’em! ’Tis ’gainst their whole nater

Calmly to look at a thing through the eyes
of us men, without reading

Into the head-lines of life a trouble of some
kind or ’nother.

Hannah is worried, I see, about the receipt
of this letter

Late in the day, to be sure, but later is
better than never.

Wait till the second one comes; quite a
different tune she’ll be singin’,

Somethin’ like Agatha’s here!” And
Agatha, laughing, responded

Joyously clear and elate, and aware of the
note in her bosom:

OUR BENNY

“ Nor will there lack invitation for all these
good neighbors, I’ll warrant;

You who have shared in our joy, you surely
will come for the second? ”

“ Ay, we will come, rest assured,” the
dominie’s cheery voice answered,

Adding a word ’neath his breath: “ God
bless her, and pity the mother! ”

“ Neighbors, good-night,” said the miller;
“ ’tis thawin’ right fast, and I’m thinkin’

Mornin’ will show us bare ground and the
ice goin’ out of the river.”

Hearty the handclasp and fervent the words
from the parson: “ God bless thee,

Thee and thy household; good-night.” The
three took their way to the village

Just as the nine o’clock bell was ringing
the New England curfew.

III

HANNAH AND AGATHA

III

HANNAH AND AGATHA

AGATHA sought her own nest, the low-
studded room with the dormer;
Maidenly white were its curtains, its cover-
let woven with cunning,
Product of grandmother's loom, its pattern
was known as the "basket";
White, too, the flooring well-scoured with
finest of sand from the river.
Dimity covered the bureau, and green-
painted rush-bottom chairs
Stood 'gainst the walls in due order, refresh-
ing the eye with their greenness,

OUR BENNY

Matching the apple-tree boughs that shaded
the dormer in summer.
Loosing the plaits of her hair, that fell to
the hem of her garment,
Rippling in golden-brown waves 'neath the
candle-gleam's flicker and flaring,
Quickly she drew from her bodice the
three-cornered letter from Benny;
Knelt by the bed, not in prayer, but to read
the few lines from her soldier
Lover, as yet undeclared; — oh, well did
she know that he loved her!
And, as she read, half in fear at the pas-
sionate, loyal, outpouring,
Quick-welling words from the depths of a
soul that was conscious of manhood,
There on her knees she remained, adroop
'neath the weight of her joy.

HANNAH AND AGATHA

Stammering words of a prayer — 'twas love
she commingled with worship —
Fell unaware from her lips ere she rose
from her knees by that bedside.
Candle-gleam flickered and flared, and
sputtered at last in the socket.
Then in the darkness she lay, her face on
the pillow upturning,
Into the darkness upsmiling, and dreamed
waking dreams of the future.
Sleep-overtaken at last, she still held the note
in her keeping;
Over her bosom it lay, her left hand was
clasping it closely.
Sleep is for girlhood and joy, but not for
the mother o'er-burdened,
Anxious and weary and worn, her heart with
its tenderness bursting!

OUR BENNY

Buried in thought, long she sat in her bed-
room over the kitchen,
Reading with slow-dripping tears a-rain
on her own precious message;
Read, and re-lived in her thoughts the days
since her Benny enlisted;
Sighed 'twixt her tears as she read what he
wrote about fame and Old Glory —
Fame? O thou breath of a moment that
passes our lips as in sighing!
Manhood's young dream, ere its prime hath
burned seven times in the furnace
Heated seven times by the tempering fires
of experience dire!
Rising, for ten was just striking, she opened
her well-worn Bible;
Laid the dear missive within it, just over
that one simple passage

HANNAH AND AGATHA

Pregnant with Life's deepest meanings for
us as for past generations,

Future as well, for our love remains death-
less and human is human

Always and ever: — *the only son of his
mother, a widow;*

Laid herself down in her bed, whereon she
had brought forth her man-child

Twenty short years before — and now!
She wept on her pillow.

Wholly forsaken by sleep she lay for a
while in the darkness,

Picturing battle and bivouac, hearing the
crackle of camp-fires,

Footfalls of sentries a-pace, the quick-
ringing "Halt!" and the challenge.

Once, as she lifted her head, it seemed as if
booming of cannon,

OUR BENNY

Borne on the rain-laden wind, had come to
her ears from the Southland !

Raising herself on her elbow she listened
intent to that booming . . .

No, 'twas the ice in the river, upheaving,
slow-crushing and grinding,

Mingled with rushing of waters that broke
from the ice-chains of winter!

Wrapping herself in a shawl, she went to
the half-opened window,

Leaned to look down toward the valley,
to hear from its depths the dull thunder

Booming with splintering crash : the break-
ing up of the river.

Lo! as she looked, as she listened, she saw
a light flash on the highroad!

Steadily upwards it moved; like a glow-
worm it crawled through the darkness;

HANNAH AND AGATHA

Nearer and nearer it came — she heard
through the uproar a wagon

Jolting up over the bar, the crunching of
wheels on the gravel.

Leaning out into the night — her heart
thrilled with strong premonition,

Knowing her hour had come — she called:

“ Who is there? ” and the parson

Sprang to the ground 'neath her window,
and answered prompt to her calling:

“ Hannah, it's I — I have come with a mes-
sage. Make haste with your dressing;
Urgent the need for us both to leave on the
last train at midnight.”

Waiting, impatient, he listened for move-
ment and stir in the household,

Counting the minutes as hours till flashed
a light in the kitchen,

OUR BENNY

Candle-light gleamed in the dormer —
he heard some one coming and going.
Drawing the bolt the old grandsire cau-
tiously opened the door,
Saw who it was and admitted his friend, but
asked him no questions.
Reached for his spectacle-case, and held out
his hand for the message,
Crumpled and yellow and torn: a word
straight from hell for the loving;
Read it at first without comment, while
holding it near to the lamplight:
*Ben to be shot — found asleep on his sentry —
must notify Hannah.*
Read it again; then, there burst from the
lips of the grandsire: “Damn him!
Serves him just right for forgettin’ his
father’s good name and his duty!”

HANNAH AND AGATHA

Impotent rage swelled the veins so shrunken
and blue in his temples,
Horror of grief and disgrace was voiced in
that oath and its meaning;
But at the sounds overhead, of hurrying
feet on the stairway,
Knowing 'twas Hannah, his daughter, he
staggered, muttered " 'Twill kill her,"
Caught at the powerful arm that was round
him, supporting, upholding
E'en as the strength of the woodman is
braced 'gainst the oak that is falling.
Sudden collapse overcame him; he sank,
as if stricken with palsy,
Into his old Windsor chair and shrivelled to
age at that moment,
Bowed 'neath the frost that was killing the
youth, whom he loved, in his springtime.

OUR BENNY

“ Father,” ’twas Hannah who spoke as she
entered full dressed for her journey,
Agatha following closely, her blue eyes
wide-staring in terror,

“ Give me the message I beg you; already
I’ve guessed at its meaning,
Hearing that oath and that judgment — I
heard it e’en through the partition.”

“ No, daughter Hannah, ’twill kill you,” he
murmured, withholding the paper.

Quick, with a gesture impatient, she seized
it, she tore out its meaning,

Swayed for a second! That shot might
have pierced her own bosom.

Turning as if into stone, no tremor in face
or in figure,

Rigid she stood for a moment, as rigid as
ever the noble

HANNAH AND AGATHA

Granite-ribbed hills of Vermont from the soil
of which she was nourished.

“ Agatha, I must be going; be brave for
the sake of my father.

Father, I'm going to plead for my boy,
there's — time, yet, I'm hoping —

Abraham Lincoln alone can speak the word
of salvation;

Straightway to him I am going; he'll hear
the prayer of a widow.

Come, I must go; our good friend here, I
know, will go with me — don't worry.

Agatha, see to the house and to father; the
neighbors will help you. . . . ”

Over the well-worn threshold the two passed
out into the darkness,

Darkness that made itself felt in a night
that was cloudy and starless.

OUR BENNY

Down the rough road to the village, the
wagon jolted and rattled.

Flashing its lights on the highway, the
lantern swung from the axle.

Dawn in the farmhouse, at last, for the two
weary watchers for morning!

Light of the coming dawn, and Agatha
laying the table,

Steadfast as ever in duty and care for the
things of the household.

Quietly hither and yon she goes from pantry
to table;

Sets out the pails for the milking and mixes
the meal for the chickens;

Opens the door of the kitchen and looks
to the eastern horizon.

HANNAH AND AGATHA

During that horror of midnight, of hours
that were never forgotten,
Girlhood had fled her forever; a woman
stood on the threshold
Whence she looked forth to a life as drear
as the mountains around her.
Spring frosts had touched her, and blighted
forever her youth and its gladness.
All through the night time her thoughts had
been travelling steadily southward:
Down the Connecticut Valley, that leads
through the heart of the Bay State,
Out to the Sound and the sea, through the
tumult of populous cities,
Over the marshes of Jersey, the Delaware's
flood-swollen waters,
Over an arm of the Bay and straight to the
sluggish Potomac —

OUR BENNY

E'en to the doors of the White House; but
penetrate farther she could not.

Now, as she stood on the threshold, without
either willing or wishing,

Back flew her thoughts from their roaming,
like birds homing straight to the moun-
tains.

Over against the horizon, brightening swiftly
to sunrise,

Dark stood those mountains, impassive,
unwitting of human life's sorrow,

Motionless sentries, forever they guarded the
Gates of the Morning

Whence, as she gazed through her tears,
the cloud-portals opening swiftly,

Issued the life-giving sun in a splendor of
radiant glory!

HANNAH AND AGATHA

Hour after hour dragged its length till the
afternoon of that morrow;

Then e'en the minutes seemed hours alter-
nate of hope and despair.

Half of the village was gathered around the
door of the station,

Talking, to ease their suspense, of the pros-
pect of favoring verdict.

Just before sunset it came, with flash and
click o'er the wires,

Straight from the heart of the Nation, from
Washington on the Potomac:

Saved — and the air was rent with a mighty
shout of rejoicing;

Up from the valley it rolled; the wind bore
the sound to the farmhouse.

IV
LINCOLN

IV

LINCOLN

“ ONLY seven days, as the almanac shows,
since we left and yet, truly,

Sometimes it seems a whole lifetime, ay,
more, an eternity even.

Heaven conjoined with hell I have lived
through this week,” said the parson,

Taking his seat on the settle; “ we scarce
could have thought of a Sabbath

Breaking like this on a week of continual
storm and upheaval.

Surely a day like the present brings with it
a true benediction:

OUR BENNY

Nature's own peace we hear speaking *Be
still* to our soul's troubled waters.

See, through the half-opened door, how the
river, in spate, down the valley

Glideth majestic and free! Not a trace of
that terrible turmoil

Raging within its wild flood when we left —
it reminds me of Lincoln."

Silent he gazed on the river, yet saw not;
his keen inner vision,

Fixed on the things of the spirit, was pic-
turing Abraham Lincoln

Such as he saw him revealed through a heart
that was tender and mighty.

Reading his thoughts in their course, the
dominie urged him, insistent:

"Tell us of *him*, I entreat, how he brought
about Benny's salvation."

LINCOLN

“ Yes, I will tell you, for here in my heart
every word is engraven.

Time was so precious! A few minutes only
we stood in his presence

Laying the case and its adjuncts, so bare and
pathetic, before him.

Listening with head as with heart, he
grasped the entire situation;

Ever his eye was on Hannah who stood like
a statue, scarce breathing,

Waiting in torment of hope for Abraham
Lincoln's decision.

Then, with a kindly, deliberate gesture, he
moved a step nearer,

Held out his hands to us both ('twas
Hannah clutched his as the drowning

Catch at a life-line; but I — I felt strangely
uplifted, ennobled,

OUR BENNY

Thrilled by the touch of a hand that was
 guiding the course of our Nation!),
While, in a voice that was tender as ever
 a woman's, he gave back
Benny to Hannah: — 'Your son shall live,
 as I hope, to rejoice
Mother and countrymen both, through
 patriot love and devotion.'
Knowing that parting was near, we men
 stood facing each other:
Animate soil of Kentucky and animate soil
 of our Green Hills —
Strange metamorphosis that, of perishing
 elements earthly! —
Hand gripping hand, and the spirit of each
 leaping forth to the other
Just for a moment. . . . 'Twas over . . . I
 followed him into the office.

LINCOLN

Hannah was left by herself in the anteroom
where he received us.

Passive she stood. Not a feature showed
even a trace of emotion;

But, as I turned to look back at her, wondering,
somewhat uneasy,

Suddenly broke up the depths of her being:
her motherhood's passion,

Agonized love and despair, and gratitude
mingled with worship,

Vented themselves in a sob that shook her
as wind shakes a poplar.

Trembling in every limb she fell on her
knees; ever lower,

Lower she sank as she bent 'neath the
mastering power of her passion,

Till she lay prone on the spot whereon, but
a moment before,

OUR BENNY

Lincoln had stood and had spoken the
mighty word of deliv'rance.

Lo! he was first at her side to aid her, to
cheer and to comfort."

Nothing was heard in the room save the
tick of the clock in the corner.

Silently falling, the tears coursed adown the
cheeks of the grandsire.

Noiseless, with wrestle of soul, the dominie
fought his emotion. . . .

Brokenly, feeling his way, their friend, the
parson, continued:

"Verily, now is the time to show forth the
manhood of Lincoln.

He who considers the least with the greatest
is ever the leader;

LINCOLN

He who forgets not the link that is weakest
most surely will conquer;

All his resources he gauges — his power of
will to accomplish,

Power of sword as of spirit, power of
mind as of cable —

All, that in pressure and labor of ever
momentous occurrence

Even that link which is weakest shall bear
well the strain of adjustment.

See now, my friends, what he did, this
Lincoln of whom I am telling!

Quickly the papers were signed, the mes-
senger sent on his errand.

Naught left for Hannah and me but to wait
all day long in the city,

Wait for assurance that Benny was still
in the land of the living!

OUR BENNY

Meanwhile the morning wore on. In conference Lincoln was hourly
Planning for this and the other; the messengers coming and going.
This that I tell you, as follows, was told to me twelve hours later:
During the Cabinet meeting, assembled at noon in his office,
Lincoln was seen to grow restless, his hands working one with the other.
Soon he appeared to be gazing abstractedly out of the window.
Presently rising, he straightened himself, and, thoughtful, with sighing,
Stood with his back to the window, his form 'gainst the blank silhouetted;
Spoke 'neath his breath: 'I must go';
and then, to his councillors turning:

LINCOLN

‘Gentlemen, you will excuse me; I find I
must drive to the outposts.

While we are planning together, the fate
of a youth, a mere stripling

Under death-sentence — an only son of his
mother, a widow —

Weighs on my heart. *I confess I can hear
and see naught but that mother.*

Midst all this turmoil, who knows if, in time,
the reprieve may have reached him!’

Whereupon, short on his heel he turned and
issued his orders;

Ordered the horses, the swiftest; ordered
the carriage made ready;

Flung himself in with a word of command,
or of prayer, to the coachman.

Southward they bore, ever southward, mile
after mile to the southward;

OUR BENNY

Came to the outposts — the forts — the
camp — the colonel's headquarters;
Found the boy saved through reprieve,
yes, saved, and in truth, as by fire,
For, when that message arrived, our Benny
stood face to the muskets,
Back to the ready-made grave in the soil
that his ancestors fought for!

“ Friends, I have preached all these years
humanity in the Divinely
Human, but henceforth I preach how
divinity, such as we know it,
Dwelleth within the great soul of a man like
our Abraham Lincoln —
He, the exponent of brotherhood, type of
America's noblest.”

LINCOLN

Silence again in the kitchen; the three were
in deep meditation.

Softly above in the bedroom — her footsteps
were heard in the stillness, —

Agatha went to and fro in sweet ministrations
to Hannah.

Slowly, with quavering voice, the grandsire,
breaking the silence,

Showed forth his spirit's contrition in words
that are found in the Scriptures:

“ ‘ Lord, now thou lettest thy servant depart
hence in peace,’ and,” he added,

“ Thankful of heart that his house has
been saved from the stain of dishonor.”

Gently the dominie spoke, as he rose and
went to the doorway,

OUR BENNY

Standing awhile there to look at the sunset
over the valley:

“ We who belong to the people, the race of
the suffering Human,

We who have known the deep meaning
of sacrifice toiling and constant,

Who with our hearts' blood are feeding the
flame on Humanity's altar —

Lighting the dark of the Ages, wherein are
no Past and no Present,

Sometimes with flickering gleam that
seemeth to threaten extinction,

Sometimes with wild-leaping fire that
lights all the centuries' darkness —

We know full well that each drop which
feedeth the flame on this altar,

Is, in the work of the Race, accounted equal
in honor,

LINCOLN

Each in itself emblematic of patriot love and
devotion.

Such is the meaning, to all generations, of
Lincoln's great manhood.

Centuries hence shall the glow of his flame
on Humanity's altar

Steadily lighten the Race, as it treadeth
the devious pathways

Leading to ultimate goal: a Union in
Love — *which is Freedom!*”

Straightway the parson drew near, and,
laying a hand on his shoulder,

Leaned both to look and to listen: a robin
sang from the orchard;

Down through the darkening valley our
noble Connecticut River

Glided majestic and free. The sunlight
played on the hilltops.

V
PEACE

V

PEACE

PEACE! from the green-crested heights of
Vermont to the shores of the level,
Slow-swinging tides of the Gulf, to the
cypress of swamp and of bayou.

Peace on the slopes of the Blue Ridge, the
plains of the swift Illinois.

Peace! and the earth-mother richer with
blood of a million of brothers.

Peace! and in homes of the millions the
ashes of heart desolation.

Peace! and yet wounds by the million
that fester and burn in the living.

OUR BENNY

Heralded Peace, who, at last, comes wan
with waiting; all wraithlike
Southland and Northland she roams, over
mountains, o'er plains, through the
valleys,
Fearfully placing her feet, under which
there should bloom only lilies,
Lest unaware she might step on the number-
less graves of the heroes,
Lying in blue or in gray beneath the all-
mantling earth-green.

“ Finally, peace for us all,” the dominie
murmured devoutly,
Drawing a long deep breath and letting it
forth in explosive
Power, as if from his shoulders the night-
mare of War, horror-laden,

PEACE

Loosed of a sudden her hold and left him
freed of her presence.

There on the postoffice steps he paused to
look at his paper;

Noted the date first of all, a world-date:
the ninth of an April

Promising much for the planting that cometh
so late in our mountains.

Noted the headlines, and then the lists of
the dead and the wounded,

Reading adown the long columns with
glance both swift, comprehensive;

Feared to rejoice prematurely lest some
well-known name be among them.

Lo! as he scanned the last column, just
midway his eye was arrested —

Eye not alone, for the blood e'en congealed
for a moment its current —

OUR BENNY

Dead! . . . The line blurred on his vision,
and further he could not, or would not.
Action, and action alone, could stir the
chilled life-blood within him; .
Action alone could bring back his pupil, the
pride of his manhood,
Back from the banks of the James and the
soil that his ancestor fought for;
Back to his home and his mother, back to
the hills of his birthplace,
Back to the grave in the churchyard — the
patriot's "life everlasting."

Straight through the village he passed,
unheeding each glad recognition;
Straight up the highway he strode, nor
paused on the bar for a breathing;

PEACE

Straight to the door of the farmhouse
where Agatha stood in the sunshine
Waving her hand, and, in wonder, marking
the pace he was keeping.

“ Oh, you are welcome! ” she cried; and
then as he neared her, perceiving

Signs of unwonted excitement: his lips
hard-set, yet the features

Wrung with a fearful emotion, the sweat
that ran from his forehead,

Straightway her eyes opened wide, the
pupils enlarging affrighted;

Dimly foreboding the truth she stood there
stock-still in the doorway,

Only uplifting her hands, palms outward,
as if in forefending

Blows that must fall and must shatter,
ay, shatter forever and ever

OUR BENNY

Idols of youth and of love — our woman-
hood's nearest and dearest.

White grew her lips and her cheeks as snow-
drops that drooped in the dooryard;

Scarcely a breath could she draw as the
dominie, gently, but urgent,

Laying a hand on her shoulder, passed with
her over the threshold

Closing the door on the spring — and a
tragedy old as Life's drama.

Spring in the hills of Kentucky, spring in
the Cumberland Valley!

Spring in the two Carolinas and deep in
Virginian forests!

Ever with hastening feet, with largess of
joy universal,

PEACE

Cometh glad Spring to the South, and
tarryeth long in her Southland,
Flinging her prodigal mantle — embroidered
with jasmine and hawthorn,
White with magnolia blooms and brilliant
with Judas-tree scarlet —
Over the teeming earth-mother that throb-
beth with life at her coming.

Slowly, with seeming neglect, our Spring
cometh here in the Northland,
Coyly, with wilful caprice, now cold, now
warm in demeanor;
Hiding her shy, dainty grace from weather
and winds that might chill her,
Trailing her delicate garments along the
edge of the meadows,

OUR BENNY

Showing her fair winsome face where the
 ferns uncurl in the woodland,
Vanishing wholly if wooed, but giving her-
 self when unsought for; —
Thus comes the Spring to the North, the
 typical spring of New England,
Comes with a grace all her own, and maketh
 of springtime a heaven
Filled with the running of waters, the sing-
 ing of thrush and of sparrow,
Laden with scent of the pine and the fra-
 grance of trailing arbutus.

Thus in the year '65 came the spring to a
 Green Mountain valley,
Blessing with bloom and with sunshine
 memorial day of Good Friday.

PEACE

Deep in the woods, in the meadows, afar
on the hillside the children

Sought for the blossoms of spring: anemone,
cowslip and mayflower;

Gathered the myrtle, the ground pine —
and all for the grave of their Benny.

Early on Saturday morning, before the dew
dried on the grasslands,

Up from the village they fared: the women,
the men and the children,

All who had known him, had loved him in
boyhood, in youth and young manhood,

Gathered by groups in the churchyard to
wait for the coming of Benny.

Bared was each head, as the parson, preced-
ing the little procession,

Entered the wide-open gate, and stood with
his friends by the maple

OUR BENNY

'Neath which the flower-lined grave was
glowing with delicate color.
Service of church there was none, nor of
creed or belief was there mention;
Only the parson spoke briefly with rever-
ence tender and loving:
“ Truly no service is needed to show forth
our love for dear Benny,
Him who hath died in his youth, whose
living and dying were service.
No, my dear friends, we are met here to
lay him away 'neath this maple,
Wrapped in the flag of his country; to say
one short prayer, and one only,
That which our Benny repeated when, first
in the charge on the breastworks,
Pierced with seven bullets he fell and knew
he was mortally wounded.

PEACE

Gallantly holding his own, for a minute of
living and loving,

Low, 'twixt the laboring breaths, he spoke
to the comrades about him:

'Boys — did I fall at the head? . . .

Thank God — it may blot out the —
wretched

Stain of my sleeping — on duty. . . . O

Father in heaven, I beseech thee

Guard him and guide him — sustain
him — my President, Abraham Lin-
coln

Who, in his mercy, has saved me — for
this — O bless him forever! —'

Death interrupted that prayer; yet, he,
being dead, still saluteth

Us, and in spirit he biddeth us hope on,
stand fast — and endure."

OUR BENNY

Borne upon shuddering breaths, a solemn

Amen responsive

Broke on the soft April air like a sob from
the hearts of the people.

Slowly the church bell began to toll off the
age of the hero,

Stroke after stroke until twenty. . . .

Scarce had its final vibration

Ceased, ere there came from the village up
on the run to the hillside,

Breathless, a-tremble, the messenger boy
from the station, and rudely

Broke to an unwitting people the news of a
nation's bereavement —

Awful that blow! Had the sun, wheeling
high in those clear April heavens

Suffered eclipse then and there, and the
face of all nature, distorted,

PEACE

Sicklied and darkened, been changed 'neath
the eyes of the people affrighted —

Less were their terror, their horror, than
that which portended the future.

Blanched were men's faces; and, question-
ing dumbly, they gazed at each other,
Questioning mutely, despairing, the meaning
of this to their Country;

Fearing their good Ship of State — which,
battered, dismantled, had nobly,

Grandly, her colors still flying, outridden
the hurricane's madness —

Failing to make in such darkness abysmal
her home port, might suffer

Shipwreck through loss of her faithful
Captain when most he was needed.

Dumb was their grief, their despair. . . .
The church bell began to toll slowly.

OUR BENNY

Over the hills, through the valleys, the
sound of that bell in its tolling

Echoed from valley to hill from morning till
far into midnight;

Ever its deep, mournful note, resounding
afar in the mountains,

Bore to the listening folk its message of
direful import:

*Abraham Lincoln is gone, our Lincoln, the
Friend of the People.*

FEB 5 1903

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