

THE SOLDIER'S REPRIEVE.

Author Unknown

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"I thought, Mr. Allen, when I gave my Bennie to his country, that not a father in all this broad land made so precious a gift—no, not one. The dear boy only slept a minute, just one little minute at his post; I know that was all, for Bennie never dozed over a duty. How prompt and reliable he was! I know he only fell asleep one little second—he was so young and not strong, that boy of mine. Why, he was as tall as I, and only eighteen! And now they shoot him because he was found asleep when doing sentinel duty. "Twenty-four hours,' the telegram said, only twenty-four hours. Where is Bennie now?"

"We will hope with his heavenly Father," said Mr. Allen soothingly.

"Yes, yes; let us hope; God is very merciful! I should be ashamed, father,' Bennie said, 'when I am a man to think I never used this great right arm'—and he held it out proudly before me—for my country when it needed it. Palsy it, rather than keep it at the plow.' 'Go, then, my boy, and God keep you!' I said. God has kept him, I think, Mr. Allen!" And the farmer repeated these last words slowly, as if in spite of his reason his heart doubted them.

"Like the apple of the eye, Mr. Owen; doubt it not."

Blossom sat near them listening with blanched cheek. She had not shed a tear. Her anxiety had been so concealed that no one had noticed it. She had occupied herself mechanically in the household cares. Now, she answered a gentle tap at the door, opening it to receive from a neighbor's hand a letter. "It is from him," was all she said.

It was like a message from the dead! Mr. Owen took the letter, but could not break the envelope on account of his trembling fingers, and held it toward Mr. Allen, with the helplessness of a child. The minister opened it and read as follows:

"Dear Father:—When this reaches you I shall be in eternity. At first it seemed awful to me, but I have thought so much about it that now it has no terror. They say they will not bind me, nor blind me, but that I may meet death like a man. I thought, father, that it might have been on the battle field, for my country, and that when I fell, it would be fighting gloriously; but to be shot down like a dog for nearly betraying it—to die for neglect of duty! O, father! I wonder the very thought does not kill me! But I shall not disgrace you; I am going to write you all about it, and when I am gone you may tell my comrades. I cannot, now.

"You know I promised Jemmie Carr's mother I would look after her boy; and when he fell sick I did all I could for him. He was not strong when he was ordered back into the ranks, and the day before that night, I carried all his luggage besides my own on our march. Towards night we went in on double quick, and though the luggage began to feel very heavy, everybody else was tired, too; and as for Jemmie, if I had not lent him an arm now and then he would have dropped by the way. I was all tired out when we came into camp, and then it was Jemmie's turn to be sentry. I would take his place; but I was too tired, father. I could not have kept awake if a gun had been pointed at my head; but I did not know it until—well, until it was too late."

"God be thanked" interrupted Mr. Owen, reverently, "I knew Bennie was not the boy to sleep carelessly at his post."

"They tell me to-day that I have a short reprieve, 'time to write to you,' the good Colonel says. Forgive him, Father, he only does his duty; he would gladly save me if he could; and do not lay my death against Jemmie. The poor boy is heart-broken, and does nothing but beg and entreat them to let him die in my place.

"I can't bear to think of mother and Blossom. Comfort them, Father! Tell them I die as a brave boy should, and that, when the war is over, they will not be ashamed of me, as they must be now. God help me! It is very hard to bear! Good-bye, father, God seems near and dear to me; not at all as if he wished me to perish forever, but as if he felt sorry for his poor sinful, broken-hearted child, and would take me to be with him and my Savior in a better life."

A deep sigh burst from Mr. Owen's heart. "Amen," he said, solemnly, "amen."

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"To-night, in the early twilight, I shall see the cows all coming home from the pasture, and precious little Blossom standing on the back stoop, waiting for me! But I shall never, never come! God bless you all! Forgive your poor Bennie!"

Late that night the door of the "back stoop" opened softly and a little figure glided out and down the footpath that led to the road by the mill. She seemed rather flying than walking, turning her head neither to the right nor left, looking only now and then to heaven, and folding her hands as if in prayer. Two hours later the same young girl stood at the mill depot, watching the coming of the night train; and the conductor, as he reached down to lift her into the car, wondered at the tear-stained face that was upturned toward the dim lantern he held in his hand. A few questions and ready answers told him all; and no father could have cared more tenderly for his only child than he for our little Blossom. She was on her way to Washington to ask President Lincoln for her brother's life. She had stolen away, leaving only a note to tell them where and why she had gone.

She had brought Bennie's letter with her; no good, kind heart like the President's could refuse to be melted by it. The next morning they reached New York, and the conductor hurried her on to Washington. Every minute, now, might be the means of saving her brother's life. And so, in an incredibly short time, Blossom reached the Capitol and hastened to the White House.

The president had just seated himself to his morning task of overlooking and signing important papers, when without one word of announcement the door softly opened, and Blossom, with down-cast eyes and folded hands, stood before him.

"Well, my child," he said in his pleasant, cheerful tones, "what do you want so bright and early this morning?"

"Bennie's life, sir," faltered Blossom.

"Who is Bennie?"

"My brother, sir. They are going to shoot him for sleeping at his post."

"O, yes," and Mr. Lincoln ran his eye over the papers before him. "I remember. It was a fatal sleep. You see, my child, it was a time of special danger. Thousands of lives might have been lost by his culpable negligence."

"So my father said," replied Blossom, gravely. "But poor Bennie was so tired, sir, and Jemie so weak. He did the work of two, sir, and it was Jemie's night, not his; but Jemie was too tired, and Bennie never thought about himself that he was tired too."

"What is this you say, child? Come here, I do not understand," and the kind man caught eagerly as ever at what seemed to be a justification of the offense.

Blossom went to him; he put his hand tenderly on her shoulder and turned up the pale face toward his. How tall he seemed! And he was the President of the United States, too! A dim thought of this kind passed for a minute through Blossom's mind, but she told her simple, straightforward story and handed Mr. Lincoln Bennie's letter to read.

He read it carefully; then taking up his pen, wrote a few hasty lines, and rang his bell.

Blossom heard this order: "Send this dispatch at once!"

The President then turned to the girl and said: "Go home, my child, and tell that father of yours, who could approve his country's sentence even when it took the life of a child like that, that Abraham Lincoln thinks the life far too precious to be lost. Go back, or—wait until tomorrow. Bennie will need a change after he has so bravely faced death; he shall go with you."

"God bless you, sir!" said Blossom; and who shall doubt that God heard and registered the request?

Two days after this interview, the young soldier came to the White House with his little sister. He was called into the President's private room and a strap fastened upon his shoulder. Mr. Lincoln then said: "The soldier that could carry a sick comrade's baggage and die for the act so uncomplainingly deserves well of his country." Then Bennie and Blossom took their way to their Green Mountain home. A crowd gathered at the mill depot to welcome them back; and as Farmer Owen's hand grasped that of the boy, tears flowed down his cheeks, and he was heard to say fervently:

"The Lord be praised!"