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Beechenbrook A Rhyme of the War

Margaret J. Preston

Imprint

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Dedication.

TO
EVERY SOUTHERN WOMAN, WHO HAS BEEN Widowed by the
War, I DEDICATE THIS RHYME, PUBLISHED DURING THE
PROGRESS OF THE STRUGGLE AND NOW RE-PRODUCED – AS
A Faint Memorial of Sufferings, OF WHICH THERE CAN BE NO
FORGETFULNESS.

M.J.P.



**BEECHENBROOK;
A
RHYME OF THE WAR.**

I.

II.

III.

IV.

V.

VI.

VII.

VIII.

IX.

X.

VIRGINIA.

JACKSON.

DIRGE FOR ASHBY.

STONEWALL JACKSON'S GRAVE.[A]

WHEN THE WAR IS OVER.

VIRGINIA CAPTA.

I.

There is sorrow in Beechenbrook Cottage; the day
Has been bright with the earliest glory of May;
The blue of the sky is as tender a blue
As ever the sunshine came shimmering through:
The songs of the birds and the hum of the bees,
As they merrily dart in and out of the trees, —
The blooms of the orchard, as sifting its snows,
It mingles its odors with hawthorn and rose, —
The voice of the brook, as it lapses unseen, —
The laughter of children at play on the green, —
Insist on a picture so cheerful, so fair,
Who ever would dream that a grief could be there!

The last yellow sunbeam slides down from the wall,
The purple of evening is ready to fall;
The gladness of daylight is gone, and the gloom
Of something like sadness is over the room.
Right bravely all day, with a smile on her brow,
Has Alice been true to her duty, — but now
Her tasks are all ended, — naught inside or out,
For the thoughtfulest love to be busy about;
The knapsack well furnished, the canteen all bright,
The soldier's grey dress and his gauntlets in sight,
The blanket tight strapped, and the haversack stored,
And lying beside them, the cap and the sword;
No last, little office, — no further commands, —
No service to steady the tremulous hands;
All wife-work, — the sweet work that busied her so,
Is finished: — the dear one is ready to go.

Not a sob has escaped her all day, — not a moan;
But now the tide rushes, — for she is alone.
On the fresh, shining knapsack she pillows her head,
And weeps as a mourner might weep for the dead.

She heeds not the three-year old baby at play,
As donning the cap, on the carpet he lay;
Till she feels on her forehead, his fingers' soft tips,
And on her shut eyelids, the touch of his lips.

"Mamma is *so* sorry! — Mamma is *so* sad!
But Archie can make her look up and be glad:
I've been praying to God, as you told me to do,
That Papa may come back when the battle is thro': —
He says when we pray, that our prayers shall be heard;
And Mamma, don't you *always* know, God keeps his word?"

Around the young comforter stealthily press
The arms of his father with sudden caress;
Then fast to his heart, — love and duty at strife, —
He snatches with fondest emotion, his wife.

"My own love! my precious! — I feel I am strong;
I know I am brave in opposing the wrong;
I could stand where the battle was fiercest, nor feel
One quiver of nerve at the flash of the steel;
I could gaze on the enemy guiltless of fears,
But I quail at the sight of your passionate tears:
My calmness forsakes me, — my thoughts are a-whirl,
And the stout-hearted man is as weak as a girl.

I've been proud of your fortitude; never a trace
Of yielding, all day, could I read in your face;
But a look that was resolute, dauntless and high,
As ever flashed forth from a patriot's eye.
I know how you cling to me, — know that to part
Is tearing the tenderest cords of your heart:
Through the length and the breadth of our Valley to-day,
No hand will a costlier sacrifice lay
On the altar of Country; and Alice, — sweet wife!

I never have worshipped you so in my life!
Poor heart, — that has held up so brave in the past, —
Poor heart! must it break with its burden at last?"

The arms thrown about him, but tighten their hold,
The cheek that he kisses, is ashy and cold,
And bowed with the grief she so long has suppressed,
She weeps herself quiet and calm on his breast.
At length, in a voice just as steady and clear
As if it had never been choked by a tear,
She raises her eyes with a softened control,
And through them her husband looks into her soul.

"I feel that we each for the other could die;
Your heart to my own makes the instant reply:
But dear as you are, Love, — my life and my light, —
I would not consent to your stay, if I might:
No! — arm for the conflict, and on, with the rest;
Virginia has need of her bravest and best!
My heart — it must bleed, and my cheek will be wet,
Yet never, believe me, with selfish regret:
My ardor abates not one jot of its glow,
Though the tears of the wife and the woman *will* flow.

"Our cause is so holy, so just, and so true, —
Thank God! I can give a defender like you!
For home, and for children, — for freedoms — for bread, —
For the house of our God, — for the graves of our dead, —
For leave to exist on the soil of our birth, —
For everything manhood holds dearest on earth:
When *these* are the things that we fight for — dare I
Hold back my best treasure, with plaint or with sigh?
My cheek would blush crimson, — my spirit be galled,
If *he* were not there when the muster was called!
When we pleaded for peace, every right was denied;
Every pressing petition turned proudly aside;
Now God judge betwixt us! — God prosper the right!

To brave men there's nothing remains, but to fight:
I grudge you not, Douglass, — die, rather than yield, —
And like the old heroes, — come home on your shield!"

The morning is breaking: — the flush of the dawn
Is warning the soldier, 'tis time to be gone;
The children around him expectantly wait, —
His horse, all caparisoned, paws at the gate:
With face strangely pallid, — no sobbings, — no sighs, —
But only a luminous mist in her eyes,
His wife is subduing the heart-throbs that swell,
And calming herself for a quiet farewell.

There falls a felt silence: — the note of a bird,
A tremulous twitter, — is all that is heard;
The circle has knelt by the holly-bush there, —
And listen, — there comes the low breathing of prayer.

"Father! fold thine arms of pity
Round us as we lowly bow;
Never have we kneeled before Thee
With such burden'd hearts as now!

Joy has been our constant portion,
And if ill must now befall,
With a filial acquiescence,
We would thank thee for it all.

In the path of present duty,
With Thy hand to lean upon,
Questioning not the hidden future,
May we walk serenely on.

For this holy, happy home-love,
Purest bliss that crowns my life, —

For these tender, trusting children, —
For this fondest, faithful wife, —

Here I pour my full thanksgiving;
And, when heart is torn from heart,
Be our sweetest tryst-word, '*Mizpah*,' —
Watch betwixt us while we part!

And if never round this altar,
We should kneel as heretofore, —
If these arms in benediction
Fold my precious ones no more, —

Thou, who in her direst anguish,
Sooth'dst thy mother's lonely lot,
In thy still unchanged compassion,
Son of Man! forsake them not!"

The little ones each he has caught to his breast,
And clasped them, and kissed them with fervent caress;
Then wordless and tearless, with hearts running o'er,
They part who have never been parted before:
He springs to his saddle, — the rein is drawn tight, —
And Beechenbrook Cottage is lost to his sight.

II.

The feathery foliage has broadened its leaves,
And June, with its beautiful mornings and eves,
Its magical atmosphere, breezes and blooms,
Its woods all delicious with thousand perfumes, —
First-born of the Summer, — spoiled pet of the year, —
June, delicate queen of the seasons, is here!

The sadness has passed from the dwelling away,
And quiet serenity brightens the day:
With innocent prattle, her toils to beguile,
In the midst of her children, the mother *must* smile.
With matronly cares, — those relentless demands
On the strength of her heart and the skill of her hands, —
The hours come tenderly, ceaselessly fraught,
And leave her small space for the broodings of thought.

Thank God! — busy fingers a solace can find,
To lighten the burden of body or mind;
And Eden's old curse proves a blessing instead, —
"In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou toil for thy bread."
For the bless'd relief in all labours that lurk,
Aye, thank Him, unhappy ones, — thank Him for work!

Thus Alice engages her thoughts and her powers,
And industry kindly lends wings to the hours:
Poor, petty employments they sometimes appear,
And on her bright needle there plashes a tear, —
Half shame and half passion; — what would she not dare
Her fervid compatriots' struggles to share?
It irks her, — the weakness of womanhood then, —
Yet such are the tears that make heroes of men!

She feels the hot blood of the nation beat high;
With rapture she catches the rallying cry:
From mountain and valley and hamlet they come!
On every side echoes the roll of the drum.
A people as firm, as united, as bold,
As ever drew blade for the blessings they hold,
Step sternly and solemnly forth in their might,
And swear on their altars to die for the right!

The clangor of muskets, — the flashing of steel, —
The clatter of spurs on the stout-booted heel, —
The waving of banners, — the resonant tramp
Of marching battalions, — the fiery stamp
Of steeds in their war-harness, newly decked out, —
The blast of the bugle, — the hurry, the shout, —
The terrible energy, eager and wild,
That lights up the face of man, woman and child, —
That burns on all lips, that arouses all powers;
Did ever we dream that such times would be ours?

One thought is absorbing, with giant control, —
With deadliest earnest, the national soul: —
"The right of self-government, crown of our pride, —
Right, bought with the sacredest blood, — is denied!
Shall we tamely resign what our enemy craves?
No! martyrs we *may* be! — we *cannot* be slaves!"

Fair women who naught but indulgence have seen,
Who never have learned what denial could mean, —

Who deign not to clipper their own dainty feet,
Whose wants swarthy handmaids stand ready to meet,
Whose fingers decline the light kerchief to hem, —
What aid in this struggle is hoped for from them?

Yet see! how they haste from their bowers of ease,
Their dormant capacities fired, — to seize
Every feminine weapon their skill can command, —
To labor with head, and with heart, and with hand.
They stitch the rough jacket, they shape the coarse shirt,
Unheeding though delicate fingers be hurt;
They bind the strong haversack, knit the grey glove,
Nor falter nor pause in their service of love.

When ever were people subdued, overthrown,
With women to cheer them on, brave as our own?

With maidens and mothers at work on their knees,
When ever were soldiers as fearless as these?

June's flower-wreathed sceptre is dropped with a sigh,
And forth like an empress steps stately July:
She sits all unveiled, amidst sunshine and balms,
As Zenobia sat in her City of Palms!

Not yet has the martial horizon grown dun,
Not yet has the terrible conflict begun:
But the tumult of legions, — the rush and the roar,
Break over our borders, like waves on the shore.
Along the Potomac, the confident foe
Stands marshalled for onset, — prepared, at a blow,
To vanquish the daring rebellion, and fling
Utter ruin at once on the arrogant thing!

How sovran the silence that broods o'er the sky,
And ushers the twenty-first morn of July;
— Date, written in fire on history's scroll, —
— Date, drawn in deep blood-lines on many a soul!

There is quiet at Beechenbrook: Alice's brow
Is wearing a Sabbath tranquility now,
As softly she reads from the page on her knee, —
"Thou wilt keep him in peace who is stayed upon Thee!"
When Sophy bursts breathlessly into the room, —
"Oh! mother! we hear it, — we hear it!.., the boom
Of the fast and the fierce cannonading! — it shook
The ground till it trembled, along by the brook."

One instant the listener sways in her seat, —
The paralysed heart has forgotten to beat;
The next, with the speed and the frenzy of fear,

She gains the green hillock, and pauses to hear.

Again and again the reverberant sound
Is fearfully felt in the tremulous ground;
Again and again on their senses it thrills,
Like thunderous echoes astray in the hills.

On tip-toe, — the summer wind lifting his hair,
With nostril expanded, and scenting the air
Like a mettled young war-horse that tosses his mane,
And frettingly champs at the bit and the rein, —
Stands eager, exultant, a twelve-year-old boy,
His face all aflame with a rapturous joy.

"*That's* music for heroes in battle array!
Oh, mother! I feel like a Roman to-day!
The Romans I read of in Plutarch; — Yes, men
Thought it noble to die for their liberties then!
And I've wondered if soldiers were ever so bold,
So gallant and brave, as those heroes of old.
— There! — listen! — that volley peals out the reply;
They prove it is sweet for their country to die:
How grand it must be! what a pride! what a joy!
— And *I* can do nothing: I'm only a boy!"

The fervid hand drops as he ceases to speak,
And the eloquent crimson fades out on his cheek.

"Oh, Beverly! — brother! It never would do!
Who comforts mamma, and who helps her like you?
She sends to the battle her darlingest one, —
She could not give both of them, — husband and son;
If she lose *you*, what's left her in life to enjoy?
— Oh, no! I am *glad* you are only a boy."
And Sophy looks up with her tenderest air,
And kisses the fingers that toy with her hair.

For her, who all silent and motionless stands,
And over her heart locks her quivering hands,
With white lips apart, and with eyes that dilate,
As if the low thunder were sounding her fate, —
What racking suspenses, what agonies stir,
What spectres these echoes are rousing for her!

Brave-natur'd, yet quaking, — high-souled, yet so pale, —
Is it thus that the wife of a soldier should quail,
And shudder and shrink at the boom of a gun,
As only a faint-hearted girl should have done?
Ah! wait until custom has blunted the keen,
Cutting edge of that sound, and no woman, I ween,
Will hear it with pulses more equal, more free
From feminine terrors and weakness, than she.

The sun sinks serenely; a lingering look
He flings at the mists that steal over the brook,
Like nuns that come forth in the twilight to pray,
Till their blushes are seen through their mantles of grey.

The gay-hearted children, but lightly oppressed,
Find perfect relief on their pillow of rest:
For Alice, no bless'd forgetfulness comes; —
The wail of the bugles, — the roll of the drums, —
The musket's sharp crack, — the artillery's roar, —
The flashing of bayonets dripping with gore, —
The moans of the dying, — the horror, the dread,
The ghastliness gathering over the dead, —
Oh! these are the visions of anguish and pain, —
The phantoms of terror that troop through her brain!

She pauses again and again on the floor,
Which the moonlight has brightened so mockingly o'er;
She wrings her cold hands with a groan of despair;

— "Oh, God! have compassion! — my darling is there!"

All placidly, dewily, freshly, the dawn
Comes stealing in pulseless tranquility on:
More freely she breathes, in its balminess, though
The forehead it kisses is pallid with woe.

Through the long summer sunshine the Cottage is stirred
By passers, who brokenly fling them a word:
Such tidings of slaughter! "The enemy cowers;" —
"He breaks!" — "He is flying!" — "Manassas is ours!"

'Tis evening: and Archie, alone on the grass,
Sits watching the fire-flies gleam as they pass,
When sudden he rushes, too eager to wait, —
"Mamma! there's an ambulance stops at the gate!"

Suspense then is past: he is borne from the field, —
"God help me!... God grant it be *not* on his shield!"
And Alice, her passionate soul in her eyes,
And hope and fear winging each quicken'd step, flies, —
Embraces, with frantical wildness, the form
Of her husband, and finds... it is living, and warm!

III.

Ye, who by the couches of languishing ones,
Have watched through the rising and setting of suns, —
Who, silent, behind the close curtain, withdrawn,
Scarce know that the current of being sweeps on, —
To whom outer life is unreal, untrue,
A world with whose moils ye have nothing to do;
Who feel that the day, with its multiform rounds,
Is full of discordant, impertinent sounds, —
Who speak in low whispers, and stealthily tread,

As if a faint footfall were something to dread, —
Who find all existence, — its gladness, its gloom, —
Enclosed by the walls of that limited room, —
Ye only can measure the sleepless unrest
That lies like a night-mare on Alice's breast.

Days come and days go, and she watches the strife
So evenly balanced, 'twixt death and 'twixt life;
Thanks God he still breathes, as each evening takes wing,
And dares not to think what the morrow may bring.

In the lone, ghostly midnight, he raves as he lies,
With death's ashen pallidness dimming his eyes:
He shouts the sharp war-cry, — he rallies his men, —
He is on the red field of Manassas again.

"Now, courage, my comrades! Keep steady! lie low!
Wait, like the couch'd lion, to spring on your foe:
Ye'll face without flinching the cannons' grim mouth,
For ye're 'Knights of the Horse-Shoe' — ye're Sons of the
South!
There's Jackson! — how brave he rides! coursing at will,
Midst the prostrated lines on the crest of the hill;
God keep him! for what will we do if he falls?
Be ready, good fellows! — be cool when he calls
To the charge: Oh! we'll beat them, — we'll turn them, — and
then
We'll ride them down madly! — On! Onward! my men!"

The feverish frenzy o'erwearies him soon,
And back on his pillows he sinks in a swoon.

And sometimes, when Alice is wetting his lip,
He turns from the draught, and refuses to sip:
— "'Tis sweet, pretty angel! — but yonder there lies