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Saw it from the Belfry

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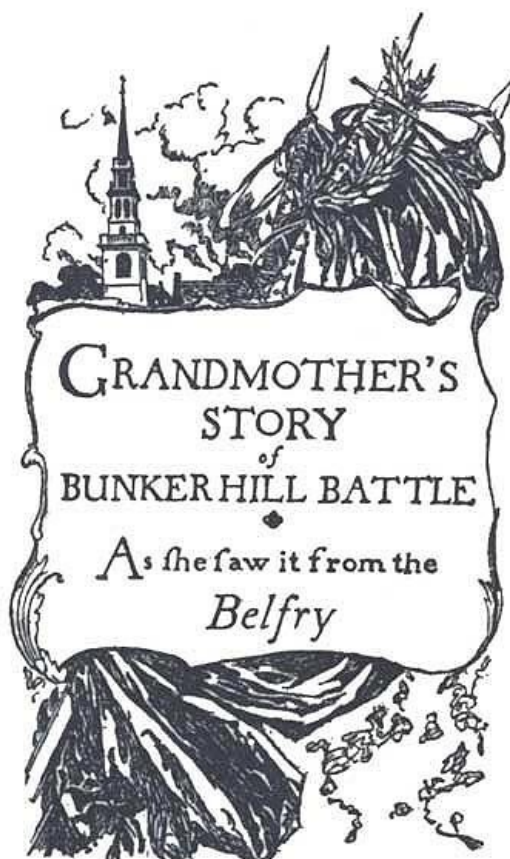
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HILL BATTLE, AS SHE SAW IT FROM THE BELFRY \*\*\*



**Grandmother's Story**  
of  
**Bunker Hill Battle**

*as She Saw it from the Belfry*

by

**Oliver Wendell Holmes**

*With Illustrations by Howard Pyle*

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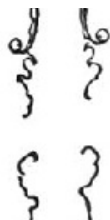
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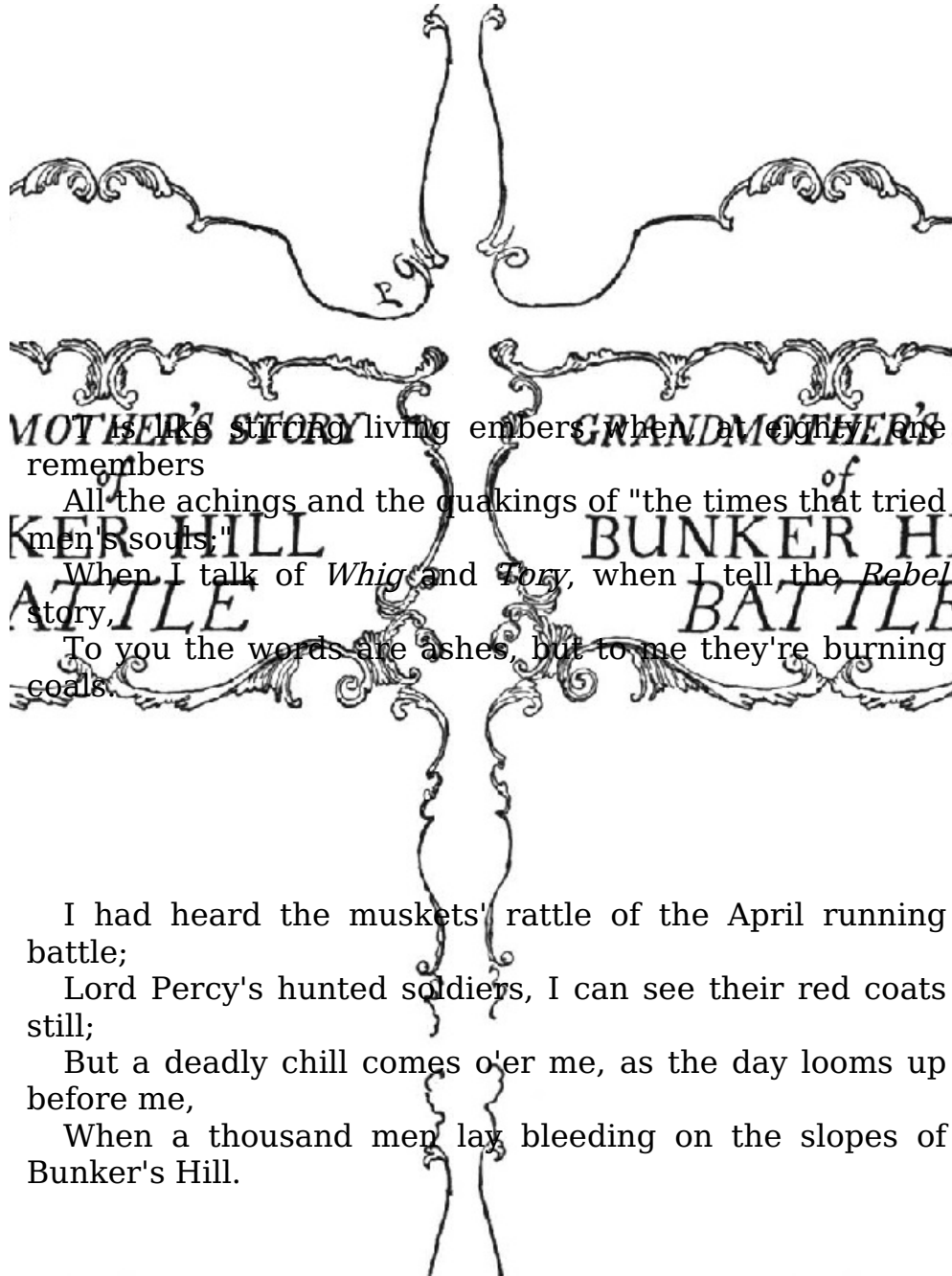
*of*

**BUNKER HILL  
BATTLE**



P





is like stirring living embers when a child  
remembers  
All the achings and the quakings of "the times that tried  
men's souls:"  
When I talk of *Whig* and *Tory*, when I tell the *Rebel*  
story,  
To you the words are ashes, but to me they're burning  
coals.

I had heard the muskets' rattle of the April running  
battle;  
Lord Percy's hunted soldiers, I can see their red coats  
still;  
But a deadly chill comes o'er me, as the day looms up  
before me,  
When a thousand men lay bleeding on the slopes of  
Bunker's Hill.



'T was a peaceful summer's morning, when the first thing gave us  
warning  
Was the booming of the cannon from the river and the shore:  
"Child," says grandma, "what's the matter, what is all this noise

and clatter?

Have those scalping Indian devils come to murder us once more?"



Poor old soul! my sides were shaking in the midst of all my quaking,  
To hear her talk of Indians when the guns began to roar:  
She had seen the burning village, and the slaughter and the pillage,  
When the Mohawks killed her father with their bullets through his door.



Then I said, "Now, dear old granny, don't you fret and worry any,  
For I'll soon come back and tell you whether this is work or play;  
There can't be mischief in it, so I won't be gone a minute"—  
For a minute then I started. I was gone the livelong day.

No time for bodice-lacing or for looking-glass grimacing;  
Down my hair went as I hurried, tumbling half-way to my heels;  
God forbid your ever knowing, when there's blood around her  
flowing,  
How the lonely, helpless daughter of a quiet household feels!



In the street I heard a thumping; and I knew it was the stumping  
Of the Corporal, our old neighbor, on that wooden leg he wore,  
With a knot of women round him,—it was lucky I had found him,  
So I followed with the others, and the Corporal marched before.

They were making for the steeple,—the old soldier and his people;  
The pigeons circled round us as we climbed the creaking stair,  
Just across the narrow river—oh, so close it made me shiver!—  
Stood a fortress on the hill-top that but yesterday was bare.





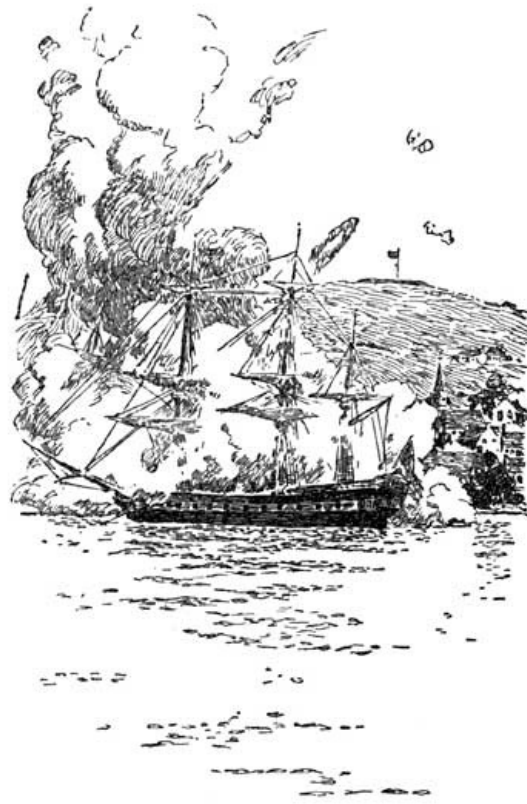


Not slow our eyes to find it; well we knew who stood behind it,  
Though the earthwork hid them from us, and the stubborn walls  
were dumb:

Here were sister, wife, and mother, looking wild upon each other,  
And their lips were white with terror as they said, **THE HOUR HAS  
COME!**

The morning slowly wasted, not a morsel had we tasted,  
And our heads were almost splitting with the cannons' deafening  
thrill,

When a figure tall and stately round the rampart strode sedately;  
It was **PRESCOTT**, one since told me; he commanded on the hill.



Every woman's heart grew bigger when we saw his manly figure,  
With the banyan buckled round it, standing up so straight and tall;  
Like a gentleman of leisure who is strolling out for pleasure,  
Through the storm of shells and cannon-shot he walked around the

wall.

At eleven the streets were swarming, for the red-coats' ranks were forming;  
At noon in marching order they were moving to the piers;  
How the bayonets gleamed and glistened, as we looked far down,  
and listened  
To the trampling and the drum-beat of the belted grenadiers!



At length the men have started, with a cheer (it seemed faint-hearted),  
In their scarlet regimentals, with their knapsacks on their backs,  
And the reddening, rippling water, as after a sea-fight's slaughter,  
Round the barges gliding onward blushed like blood along their tracks.

So they crossed to the other border, and again they formed in order;  
And the boats came back for soldiers, came for soldiers, soldiers still:  
The time seemed everlasting to us women faint and fasting,—  
At last they're moving, marching, marching proudly up the hill.



We can see the bright steel glancing all along the lines advancing  
—

Now the front rank fires a volley—they have thrown away their  
shot;

For behind their earthwork lying, all the balls above them flying,  
Our people need not hurry; so they wait and answer not.

Then the Corporal, our old cripple (he would swear sometimes and  
tipple),—

He had heard the bullets whistle (in the old French war) before,—

Calls out in words of jeering, just as if they all were hearing,—

And his wooden leg thumps fiercely on the dusty belfry floor:—



"Oh! fire away, ye villains, and earn King George's shillin's,  
But ye'll waste a ton of powder afore a 'rebel' falls;  
You may bang the dirt and welcome, they're as safe as Dan'l  
Malcolm

Ten foot beneath the gravestone that you've splintered with your balls!"

In the hush of expectation, in the awe and trepidation  
Of the dread approaching moment, we are well-nigh breathless all;  
Though the rotten bars are failing on the rickety belfry railing,  
We are crowding up against them like the waves against a wall.





Just a glimpse (the air is clearer), they are nearer,—nearer,—  
nearer,  
When a flash—a curling smoke-wreath—then a crash—the steeple  
shakes—  
The deadly truce is ended; the tempest's shroud is rended;  
Like a morning mist it gathered, like a thunder-cloud it breaks!

Oh the sight our eyes discover as the blue-black smoke blows over!  
The red-coats stretched in windrows as a mower rakes his hay;  
Here a scarlet heap is lying, there a headlong crowd is flying  
Like a billow that has broken and is shivered into spray.



Then we cried, "The troops are routed! they are beat—it can't be doubted!  
God be thanked, the fight is over!"—Ah! the grim old soldier's smile!



"Tell us, tell us why you look so?" (we could hardly speak, we shook so),—

"Are they beaten? *Are* they beaten? **ARE** they beaten?"—"Wait a while."

Oh the trembling and the terror! for too soon we saw our error:  
They are baffled, not defeated; we have driven them back in vain;  
And the columns that were scattered, round the colors that were tattered,  
Toward the sullen, silent fortress turn their belted breasts again.





All at once, as we are gazing, lo the roofs of Charlestown blazing!  
They have fired the harmless village; in an hour it will be down!  
The Lord in heaven confound them, rain his fire and brimstone  
round them,—  
The robbing, murdering red-coats, that would burn a peaceful  
town!

They are marching, stern and solemn; we can see each massive  
column  
As they near the naked earth-mound with the slanting walls so  
steep.  
Have our soldiers got faint-hearted, and in noiseless haste  
departed?  
Are they panic-struck and helpless? Are they palsied or asleep?



Now! the walls they're almost under! scarce a rod the foes  
asunder!  
Not a firelock flashed against them! up the earthwork they will  
swarm!

But the words have scarce been spoken, when the ominous calm is broken,  
And a bellowing crash has emptied all the vengeance of the storm!

So again, with murderous slaughter, pelted backwards to the water,  
Fly Pigot's running heroes and the frightened braves of Howe;  
And we shout, "At last they're done for, it's their barges they have run for:  
They are beaten, beaten, beaten; and the battle's over now!"





And we looked, poor timid creatures, on the rough old soldier's features,

Our lips afraid to question, but he knew what we would ask:

"Not sure," he said; "keep quiet,—once more, I guess, they'll try it

—

Here's damnation to the cut-throats!"—then he handed me his flask,

Saying, "Gal, you're looking shaky; have a drop of old Jamaiky; I'm afeard there'll be more trouble afore the job is done;" So I took one scorching swallow; dreadful faint I felt and hollow, Standing there from early morning when the firing was begun.



All through those hours of trial I had watched a calm clock dial,  
As the hands kept creeping, creeping,—they were creeping round  
to four,  
When the old man said, "They're forming with their bagonets fixed  
for storming:  
It's the death-grip that's a-coming,—they will try the works once  
more."

With brazen trumpets blaring, the flames behind them glaring,  
The deadly wall before them, in close array they come;  
Still onward, upward toiling, like a dragon's fold uncoiling,—  
Like the rattlesnake's shrill warning the reverberating drum!



Over heaps all torn and gory—shall I tell the fearful story,  
How they surged above the breast-work, as a sea breaks over a  
deck;  
How, driven, yet scarce defeated, our worn-out men retreated,

With their powder-horns all emptied, like the swimmers from a wreck?

It has all been told and painted; as for me, they say I fainted,  
And the wooden-legged old Corporal stumped with me down the  
stair:

When I woke from dreams affrighted the evening lamps were  
lighted,—

On the floor a youth was lying; his bleeding breast was bare.







And I heard through all the flurry, "Send for **WARREN!** hurry! hurry!  
Tell him here's a soldier bleeding, and he'll come and dress his  
wound!"

Ah, we knew not till the morrow told its tale of death and sorrow,  
How the starlight found him stiffened on the dark and bloody  
ground.

Who the youth was, what his name was, where the place from  
which he came was,  
Who had brought him from the battle, and had left him at our door,  
He could not speak to tell us; but 't was one of our brave fellows,  
As the homespun plainly showed us which the dying soldier wore.



For they all thought he was dying, as they gathered round him crying,—  
And they said, "Oh, how they'll miss him!" and "What *will* his mother do?"

Then, his eyelids just unclosing like a child's that has been dozing,  
He faintly murmured, "Mother!"—and—I saw his eyes were blue.

"Why, grandma, how you're winking!" Ah, my child, it sets me  
thinking  
Of a story not like this one. Well, he somehow lived along;  
So we came to know each other, and I nursed him like a—mother,  
Till at last he stood before me, tall, and rosy-cheeked, and strong.





And we sometimes walked together in the pleasant summer weather,  
—"Please to tell us what his name was?" Just your own, my little dear,—  
There's his picture Copley painted: we became so well acquainted,  
That—in short, that's why I'm grandma, and you children all are here!

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GRANDMOTHER'S STORY OF BUNKER HILL BATTLE, AS SHE SAW IT FROM THE BELFRY \*\*\*

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