

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

## Christmas Gift

ROBERT PENN WARREN

Page | 1

*In this short story, first published in the Winter 1937 issue of the Virginia Quarterly Review, novelist and poet Robert Penn Warren (1905–89) draws on elements of the Christmas story to illumine the tale of a ten-year-old boy named Sill Lancaster as he starts out on a journey to find a doctor to deliver a child for his sister.*

*Describe the boy. What is his and his family's situation? How do others in the community regard him and his family? Track Sill's progress throughout his journey: how is he treated by each person that he meets—the wagon driver, the shopkeeper, the shop patrons, the doctor's wife, and Doc Small? Why does the shopkeeper give Sill candy? Why does Doc Small give Sill the cigarette despite his initial hesitation? Why does the boy give the doctor a piece of candy? Have the gifts he has received prepared him to give himself? How so? How is this story a Christmas story? What is the "Christmas gift" of the story's title?*

The big white flakes sank down from the sagging sky. A wet gray light hung over everything; and the flakes looked gray against it, then turned white as they sank toward the dark earth. The roofs of the few houses along the road looked sogged and black. The man who sat in the wagon that moved slowly up the road wore an old quilt wrapped around his shoulders and a corduroy cap pulled down over his eyes. His ears stuck out from under the cap, thin as paper and lined with purplish veins. Before him, vanishing, the flakes touched the backs of the mules, which steamed and were black like wet iron.

When the man spoke to the boy on the seat beside him, the ends of his mustache twitched the amber drops that clung to it. "You kin git off at the store," he said.

The boy nodded his head, which looked tight and small under the rusty-felt man's hat he wore.

The hoofs of the mules cracked the skim ice in the ruts, and pale yellow mud oozed up around the fetlocks. The wagon wheels turned laboriously, crackling the ice with a sound like paper.

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

## *The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

The man pulled on the reins, and the mules stopped, their heads hanging under the sparse downward drift of flakes. “Whoa,” he said, after the mules had already stopped. He pointed his thumb toward the frame building set beside the road. “You kin git off here, son,” he said. “Most like they kin tell you here.”

Page | 2

The boy climbed over the side of the wagon, set his foot on the hub, and jumped. His feet sank in the half-frozen, viscous mud. Turning, he took a step toward the building, then stopped. “Much obliged,” he said, and started on. For a moment the man peered after him from small red-rimmed eyes. He jerked the reins. “Giddap,” he said; and the mules lay against the traces, their hoofs crackling the skim ice.

The boy mounted the steps to the sloping boards of the porch, and put his sharp grey claw-like fingers on the latch-bar. Very quietly, he pushed the door inward a little space, slipped his body through the opening, and closed the door, letting the latch back down without a sound. He looked down the shadowy corridor of the store between the shelves of cans and boxes and the clothing hung on racks against the other wall. At the end of the corridor some men sat, their bodies in huddled outline against the red glow of a stove.

With hesitant steps, the boy approached them, stopping just behind the circle. A big man, whose belly popped the broad leather belt he wore, let his chair come forward to rest on the floor, and surveyed him. “What kin I do for you today, buddy?” he said.

The tight skin of the boy’s face puckered greyly toward the lips, and his Adam’s apple twitched up his throat. The big man kept on looking at the boy, who stood dumbly beyond the circle, the over-size mackinaw hanging to his knees, and shook his head at the big man.

“You wanter git warmed up?” the big man said.

The boy shook his head again.

“Naw sir,” he managed.

“You look cold,” the big man said. “You come round here.” He motioned to the open space in front of the stove.

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

## *The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

Eyes fixed in question on the big man's face, the boy obeyed the gesture. He came round, carefully stepping over a man's out-thrust leg. He stood inside the circle, about six feet from the stove, and spread his hands out to it.

"Git up closter," the big man said. "Git yore bottom up to hit."

Page | 3

The boy moved forward, and turned his back to the stove, his hands behind him working weakly toward the warmth. The men kept looking at him. Steam from the mackinaw rose up against the stove, with the sick smell of hot, wet wool.

"Now ain't that better?" the big man demanded.

The boy nodded at him.

"Who are you, pardner?" one of the men said.

The boy turned toward him. He was a short stocky man, bald and swarthy, and he sat with his booted legs bunched under him like an animal ready to spring.

"I know who he is, I've seen him," another man said. "He's one of Milt Lancaster's kids."

Another man beyond the stove leaned forward, bucking his chair nearer to the boy. "Now ain't that nice," he said. "Pleased ter meet you. So you're one of Milt's little bastards."

The bald, swarthy man glared at him. "Shut up!" he ordered abruptly.

The other man leaned elaborately back and studied the ceiling, softly whistling between his teeth.

"In doing yore Satiday trading?" the bald swarthy one said.

The boy shook his head. Then he looked at the big man. "I wanter git the docter."

"That's what he's for," the big man admitted, and blinked at the stove.

"Yore folks sick?" the bald, swarthy man said.

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

“My sister,” the boy said, “she’s gonna have a baby.”

The man who was whistling stopped. “Yore little sister, buddy?” He addressed the ceiling in mock solicitude, and shook his head. “Them Lancasters allus did calf young.”

Page | 4

“Hit’s my big sister,” the boy said to the bald man. “She come up here last summer. She ain’t nuthin but my sister on my ma’s side.”

“Well, well,” said the man who was looking at the ceiling. He let his chair thump down on the front legs and spoke to no one in particular. “So they’s gonna be another little bastard out to Milt’s place.”

The bald swarthy man stared glumly across at the speaker.

“Bill Stover,” he commented with no feeling, “you gonna make me stomp hell outer you fore sun.”

The boy glanced quickly from one to the other. The bald swarthy man stared across the space, his legs bunched under him. The other man grinned, and winked sidewise.

“I oughter do hit now,” the bald swarthy one said as if to himself.

The other stopped grinning.

“If you want the doc,” the big man said, “you go up the road four houses on the right hand side. It ain’t no piece. That’s where Doc Small lives. They’s a office in his front yard right smack on the road, but you go up to the house, that’s where he is.”

“Hit’s a chicken office,” one of the men said. “That’s where the doc keeps his chickens now going on twenty years.”

“You ain’t gonna miss hit,” the big man said.

The boy came out of the circle and stopped before the big man. He looked up with a quick, furtive motion of the head. “Much obliged,” he said. He pulled his mackinaw

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

about him, taking up the slack in the garment, and moved down the corridor toward the door.

“Wait a minute,” the big man called after him. He got up ponderously to his feet, hitched his belt up on his belly, and went forward to the single glass showcase. The men watched him, craning their necks, all except the bald swarthy one, who crouched and stared at the red bulge of the stove.

Page | 5

The big man reached into the glass showcase and took out a half dozen sticks of red-striped candy. He thrust them at the boy, who, looking suspiciously at the objects, shook his head.

“Take ’em,” the man ordered.

The boy kept his hands in the pockets of the mackinaw. “I ain’t got nuthin ter pay fer it with,” he said.

“Here, take ’em, buddy,” the man said.

The boy reached out his hand uneasily, all the while studying the man’s face, which was without expression. The fingers, scaled grey by cold like a bird’s claw, closed on the candy, jerked back, clutching the sticks. The hand holding the candy slipped into the loose mackinaw pocket.

“Beat it,” the big man said, “afore they beat hell outer you at home.”

The boy slipped out the door, quick and quiet as a cat.

The big man came back to the stove and sank morosely into his chair. He tilted it back and put his arms behind his head, on which the thin brown hair was slickly parted.

“You sick, Al?” one of the men said to him.

He did not answer.

“You must be sick, giving something away just off-hand like that.”

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

Bill Stover again leaned forward, wet his lips, and winked at the man who spoke. He himself seemed about to speak. Then he saw the face of the bald swarthy man, whose dark eyes burned with a kind of indolent savagery.

“You go straight to hell,” the big man was wearily saying.

Page | 6

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The snow had almost stopped. It was getting colder now. The flakes were smaller now, drawing downward breathlessly like bits of white lint. They clung to the soaked grass by the road and lay on the frozen mud. The boy’s feet cracked the skim ice on the mud, then, in withdrawal, made a sucking sound.

Two hundred yards up the road he came to the place. Jutting on the road, the one-room frame building stood beside a big cedar. A tin sign, obscured by rust and weather, was nailed to the door, carrying the words: Doctor A. P. Small, Office. The boy turned up the path by the cedar, whose black boughs swooped down toward the bare ground. The house was set far back from the road, half hidden by trellises to which leafless horny vine clutched and curled. The windows of the house gave blankly, without reflection, on the yard where grass stuck stiffly up from dirty ice-curdied pools at the roots. The door had a glass pane in it; behind the glass a lace curtain hung like a great coarse cobweb.

He tapped the paintless wood of the door.

It was a woman who, at last, opened the door.

“What do you want, boy?” she said.

“I wanten git the docter,” he said.

She said, “Clean your feet and come in,” and abruptly turned down the low hall. He scraped his shoes, stooped to wipe them with his fingers, and then, wringing the mud from his hands, wiped them on the mackinaw. He followed her, with quick secret glances from one side to the other. She was standing before a door, her thin arm pointing inward. “You come in here,” she ordered. He stood back from the hearth while the woman thrust her hands nervously at the blaze. She was a little woman, and while she warmed her

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

## *The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

hands, she kept looking over her shoulder at him with a wry, bird-like asperity. “What’s the matter?” she said.

“My sister’s gonna have a baby,” he said.

“Who are you, boy?”

“Sill Lancaster’s my name, mam,” he said, looking at her little hands that approached and jerked from the bright blaze.

“Oh,” she said. She turned fully at him, inspected him sharply from head to foot. “You ought to take off your hat when you come in the house, boy,” she said.

He took the big hat off his head, and standing before her, held it tight in both hands.

She nodded at him; said, “Wait a minute”; and was gone out the door.

With a dubious, inquiring step, as on suspected ice, he went across the straw matting toward the hearth, and put his back to the fire. He looked at all the objects in the room, covertly spying on them as though they had a life of their own: the gilt iron bed covered by a lace counterpane, the unpainted rocking chairs with colored pillows on the seats that were pulled up to the hearth, the table on which stood a basket full of socks rolled up in neat balls. The fire spat and sputtered in mild sibilance, eating at the chunks of sawn wood on the hearth. And the clock, its face supported by plump cupids of painted china, ticked with a small busy sound. The boy laid his hat on the yellow cushion of one of the chairs and put his hands to the fire. Against the plump little cushion, its color so bright, the hat was big and dirty. With hands still stretched out, the boy regarded it. It was soggy black with wet flecks of mud clinging to it; at the creases it was worn through. The boy took it quickly off the chair.

With that neat industrious sound the clock kept on ticking.

“Hello, son,” the man in the door said.

The man was buttoning up a brown overcoat that dropped to his ankles. Beneath the coat his small booted feet stuck out. The woman slipped in past him and came to the fire, put her hands toward the blaze again, jerked them back, all the while looking at the boy.

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

The man pulled a black fur cap on his head and turned down the ear-flaps. “Les go,” he said.

The woman went up to him, touching his breast with a quick indecisive motion as when she spread her hands to the fire.

Page | 8

“Don’t wait up for me,” he said.

He put his face down, a sharp expressionless face that seemed inconsequential under the big fur cap; and the woman kissed his cheek. Her kiss made a neat, dry sound, like a click.

“Les go,” he said.

He went into the hall, the boy following to the door of the room, where the woman stood aside to let him pass. He paused an instant at the threshold. “Much obliged,” he said to her, and slipped down the hall after the man like a shadow.

A horse and buggy, the curtains up, stood beyond the cedar at the corner of the office. The powdery flakes of snow drifted cautiously downward, were lost in the dark branches of the tree, on the road where the horse stood, head down in patience.

“You get in,” the man said, and went around to the driver’s side. The boy climbed into the buggy, slipping under the curtain. The man got in and bent to fasten the curtain flap on his side. “You fix ’em over there,” he said, and picked up the reins. The boy fumbled with the metal catch, the man, reins in hand, watching him. “Don’t you know nothing, son?” he said.

“I ain’t never fixed one, afore,” the boy said.

The man thrust the reins into the boy’s hands, leaned across his knees to latch the curtain, straightened up, and took the reins as though lifting them from a peg. “You pull that rug off the seat back of you,” he said, “and give it here.”

The boy obeyed, unfolding the rug. The man took an end, jabbed it under his thigh and wrapped it around the outside leg. “Now fix yourself up over there,” he ordered. He shook out the reins through the slit in the curtain.

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

The horse swung into the road, the front wheel groaning and scraping with the short turn, the buggy jerking side-wise over the ruts. The buggy straightened out, and drew more easily. The hoofs crunched and sloshed, the wheels turning.

“That’s right, ain’t it,” the doctor said, “we go outer the settlement this a-way?”

“Yes sir,” the boy said.

“I thought I recollected it so.”

They drew past the store. A man went down the steps and started to walk up the road, walking with a plunging, unsteady stride, plowing the mud. His high shoulders hunched and swayed forward.

“John Graber.” The doctor jerked his mittened thumb toward the man. “He better be gitting on home, his woman sick like she is.” He shook his head, the sharp features without expression. “A mighty sick woman. Kidneys,” he said.

“Yes sir,” the boy said.

“Graber’ll be cooking his own supper fore long.”

They passed the last house, a small grey house set in the open field. Yellow gullies ran across the field, bald plateaus of snow-smearred sod between gully and gully. A mule stood close to the barbed wire fence which separated the field from the road, and the fine flakes sank in the field and the gullies. From the chimney of the house a line of smoke stood up very still amidst the descending flakes.

“Graber’s house,” the doctor said.

The boy sat up straight and peered through the isinglass panels at the house and the smoke and the gutted field.

“Do I turn off up the creek?” the doctor asked.

“Yes sir.”

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

They crossed the wood bridge, where the timbers creaked and rattled loosely with the turning wheels. Beneath it the swollen water plunged between limestone rocks, sucking the yellow foam. The flakes touched the spewing foam, the water plunging with a hollow constant sound.

Page | 10

“What’s your pappy doing now?” the doctor said.

“My pappy’s croppin on a place fer Mr. Porsum, but hit ain’t no good.”

“Uh-huh,” the man grunted. He looked through the isinglass in front. They had turned off the main road up the road by the creek. On one side, the limestone stuck out from the bluff side, thin grey icicles hanging from the grey stone among the shriveled fern fronds. The creek, below the dead growth of the gorge on the other side, made its hollow sound.

“Hit ain’t worth nuthin. Cain’t even grow sassafras on hit.”

“Uh-huh,” the man said.

“We be leaving this year. We ain’t gonna have no truck no more with Mr. Porsum that ole son-of-a-bitch. He ain’t done nuthin like he said. He ain’t . . .”

“That’s what your pappy says,” the man said.

“My pappy says he’s a goddam sheep-snitchin son-a-bitch.”

The man stared through the isinglass pane, his sharp nose and chin sticking out in front, his head wobbling with the motion of the buggy. Then he opened his mouth: “I reckon Jim Porsum’s got something to say on his side.”

The boy took a stolen glance at the man’s face, then relapsed to the motion of the buggy. Out of the red mess of the road, limestone poked, grey and slick like wet bone, streaked with red mud. The wheels surmounted the stone, jolting down beyond on the brittle mud. On the bluff side the cedars hung. Their thick roots thrust from the rotten crevices of stone, the roots black with moss, garnished with ice; their tops cut off the light.

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

## *The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

The man reached the reins over to the boy. “Hold ’em,” he said.

The boy drew his hands from under the rug and held the reins. He grasped them very tight with both hands, the knuckles chapped and tight, and peered through the isinglass panel at the horse; the head of the horse, under the cedars, bobbed up and down.

Page | 11

Clamping his mittens between his knees, the man rolled a cigarette. His breath, as he licked the paper, came frostily out from his mouth in a thin parody of smoke. He lighted the cigarette; then, as he reached for the reins, he found the boy observing him, observing the twisted paper that hung from his lips. He did not put the tobacco sack in his pocket, but, after a moment of hesitation, held it toward the boy. “All right,” he said, “go on and take it.”

The boy shook his head, watching the sack.

“Aw hell,” the man said, and dropped the sack on the boy’s lap.

The boy took the sack without assurance, adjusted the paper, poured tobacco into it. Biting the string with his teeth, big square teeth irregularly set in the tight mouth, he pulled the sack together, and dropped it. Then he lifted the paper to his lips; the tip of his tongue darted out between his lips, strangely quick from the stolid, pinched face, and licked the edge of the paper. With that delicacy of motion, with the sharp grey fingers bunched like claws together to hold the bit of paper to his mouth, the boy, crouching there in the dim interior, looked at that instant like a small coon intently feeding.

He took a deep drag of the smoke, the end of the cigarette shriveling with the sucking coal, and his thin chest expanded under the cloth of the mackinaw.

Balancing the sack in his mittened hand, the doctor regarded the process. The smoke drifted colorless from the boy’s nostrils, which were red and flattened. “You ought not to do it,” the doctor said, “and you just a kid like you are.”

“I’m ten,” the boy said.

“It’s gonna stunt your growth all right.”

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

“Hit never stunted my pappy’s growth none, and he’s been a-smokin ever since he was eight. He’s big. Ain’t you never seen him?”

The doctor looked at the lips which puckered greyly to the twist of paper, the pale eyes set close together under the man-size hat. The two cigarettes, the man’s and the boy’s, glowed indecisively in the shadow. “I’ve seen him all right,” the man said at length.

Page | 12

“He’s a plenty strong son-a-bitch,” the boy said.

The man pushed his cigarette through a crack in the curtain, and sank back. His torso, swathed in the heavy overcoat, rolled and jerked to the impact of rut or stone like some lifeless object in uneasy water. Down the gorge, like the sound of wind driving through woods, the creek maintained its hollow constant plunging. “I didn’t know Milt Lancaster had any girl big enough to be having babies yet,” the man said.

“He ain’t. Not I knows anything about.”

“You said your sister, didn’t you?”

“She’s my sister on my maw’s side. That’s what she says and that’s what my maw says.”

The live cigarette, burned almost to the very end, hung at the corner of the boy’s lips, glowing fitfully and faintly with his speech. It hung there, untouched by his hands, which were thrust under the rug. He no longer drew the smoke in; it seemed to seep in without conscious effort on his part, drifting from his nostrils thinly with his breath.

“She just come up here last summer,” the boy said. “I never knowed nuthin bout her afore that. Maw was glad ter see her, I reckon. At first, I reckon.”

“Uh-huh,” the man said absently, his sharp features fixed forward apparently without attention.

“But pappy warn’t, he just raised holy hell fer sartin. She just worked round the house and never said nuthin ter nobody. Cept ter me and the kids. Then pappy got so he didn’t pay her no mind ter speak of.”

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

The cigarette burned close to the lip, the paper untwisting so that bits of red ash slipped from it and fell toward the rug. The boy withdrew one hand from beneath the rug, and with thumb and forefinger pinched together, removed the cigarette. The paper had stuck to the flesh of the lip; he jerked it free, licking the place with that strange darting motion of the tongue tip. The tongue was pink and damp against the dry grey flesh of the lips. “Then she up and got sick and she’s gonna have a baby,” he said.

Page | 13

“So that’s why she’s up here,” the man said.

The boy shook his head. “I dunno,” he said. “She just come.”

In the gloom of the buggy, their bodies, one long and lax against the back of the seat, the other short and upright, jerked and swayed.

The road climbed a little. The bluff wall lost its steepness, falling to heaps of detritus among boulders. No cedars showed here, only stalks of weeds and the wiry strands of vine showing on the broken surface. Then the road went down again, swinging away from the creek. There was no further sound of the water.

At the foot of the slight grade the bottom spread out: bare corn fields with stubble and shocks that disintegrated to the ground, rail fences lapped by the leafless undergrowth. Away to the left a log house stood black under bare black trees. From it the somnolent smoke ascended, twined white and grey against the grey sky. The snow had stopped.

Beyond the bottoms, the knobs looked cold and smoky. From them, and from the defiles, fingers of mist, white to their blackness, crooked downward toward the bare land. The horizon rim, fading, sustained a smoky wreath that faded upward to the space without sun.

They drew to the lane that led to the log house.

“You go on past here,” the boy said. “Hit’s up them knobs.”

The boy, almost surreptitiously, took a stick of candy from his pocket, broke off half, and stuck it between his lips. He looked at the man’s sharp, expressionless profile. Then he held out the piece to him. Without a word the man took it and stuck it between his lips, sucking it.

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

They moved forward between the empty fields.

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Page | 14



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