

WHITTIER POEM
The Garrison of Cape Ann, 1857
By John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892).
The poetical Works in Four Volumes

From the hills of home forth looking, far beneath the tent-like span
Of the sky, I see the white gleam of the headland of Cape Ann.
Well I know its coves and beaches to the ebb-tide glimmering down,
And the white-walled hamlet children of its ancient fishing town.

Long has passed the summer morning, and its memory waxes old,
When along yon breezy headlands with a pleasant friend I strolled.
Ah! the autumn sun is shining, and the ocean wind blows cool,
And the golden-rod and aster bloom around thy grave, Rantoul!

With the memory of that morning by the summer sea I blend
A wild and wondrous story, by the younger Mather penned,
In that quaint Magnalia Christi, with all strange and marvellous things,
Heaped up huge and undigested, like the chaos Ovid sings.

Dear to me these far, faint glimpses of the dual life of old,
Inward, grand with awe and reverence; outward, mean and coarse and cold;
Gleams of mystic beauty playing over dull and vulgar clay,
Golden-threaded fancies weaving in a web of hodden gray.

The great eventful Present hides the Past; but through the din
Of its loud life hints and echoes from the life behind steal in;
And the lore of homeland fireside, and the legendary rhyme,
Make the task of duty lighter which the true man owes his time.

So, with something of the feeling which the Covenanter knew,
When with pious chisel wandering Scotland's moorland graveyards through,
From the graves of old traditions I part the black-berry-vines,
Wipe the moss from off the headstones, and retouch the faded lines.

Where the sea-waves back and forward, hoarse with rolling pebbles, ran,
The garrison-house stood watching on the gray rocks of Cape Ann;
On its windy site uplifting gabled roof and palisade,
And rough walls of unhewn timber with the moonlight overlaid.

On his slow round walked the sentry, south and eastward looking forth
O'er a rude and broken coast-line, white with breakers stretching north,-
Wood and rock and gleaming sand-drift, jagged capes, with bush and tree,
Leaning inland from the smiting of the wild and gusty sea.

Before the deep-mouthed chimney, dimly lit by dying brands,
Twenty soldiers sat and waited, with their muskets in their hands;
On the rough-hewn oaken table the venison haunch was shared,
And the pewter tankard circled slowly round from beard to beard.

Long they sat and talked together, –talked of wizards Satan-sold;
Of all ghostly sights and noises, –signs and wonders manifold;
Of the spectre-ship of Salem, with the dead men in her shrouds,
Sailing sheer above the water, in the loom of morning clouds;

Of the marvellous valley hidden in the depths of Gloucester woods,
Full of plants that love the summer, –blooms of warmer latitudes;
Where the Arctic birch is braided by the tropic's flowery vines,
And the white magnolia-blossoms star the twilight of the pines!

But their voices sank yet lower, sank to husky tones of fear,
As they spake of present tokens of the powers of evil near;
Of a spectral host, defying stroke of steel and aim of gun;
Never yet was ball to slay them in the mould of mortals run.

Thrice, with plumes and flowing scalp-locks, from the midnight wood they came, –
Thrice around the block-house marching, met, unharmed, its volleyed flame;
Then, with mocking laugh and gesture, sunk in earth or lost in air,
All the ghostly wonder vanished, and the moonlit sands lay bare.

Midnight came; from out the forest moved a dusky mass that soon
Grew to warriors, plumed and painted, grimly marching in the moon.
“Ghosts or witches,” said the captain, “thus I foil the Evil One!”
And he rammed a silver button, from his doublet, down his gun.

Once again the spectral horror moved the guarded wall about;
Once again the levelled muskets through the palisades flashed out,
With that deadly aim the squirrel on his tree-top might not shun,
Nor the beach-bird seaward flying with his slant wing to the sun.

Like the idle rain of summer sped the harmless shower of lead.
With a laugh of fierce derision, once again the phantoms fled;
Once again, without a shadow on the sands the moonlight lay,
And the white smoke curling through it drifted slowly down the bay!

“God preserve us!” said the captain; “never mortal foes were there;
They have vanished with their leader, Prince and Power of the air!
Lay aside your useless weapons; skill and prowess naught avail;
They who do the Devil's service wear their master's coat of mail!”

So the night grew near to cock-crow, when again a warning call
Roused the score of weary soldiers watching round the dusky hall
And they looked to flint and priming, and they longed for break of day;
But the captain closed his Bible: “Let us cease from man, and pray!”

To the men who went before us, all the unseen powers seemed near,
And their steadfast strength of courage struck its roots in holy fear.
Every hand forsook the musket, every head was bowed and bare,
Every stout knee pressed the flag-stones, as the captain led in prayer.

Ceased thereat the mystic marching of the spectres round the wall,
But a sound abhorred, unearthly, smote the ears and hearts of all,-
Howls of rage and shrieks of anguish! Never after mortal man
Saw the ghostly leaguers marching round the block-house of Cape Ann.

So to us who walk in summer through the cool and sea-blown town,
From the childhood of its people comes the solemn legend down.
Not in vain the ancient fiction, in whose moral lives the youth
And the fitness and the freshness of an undecaying truth.

Soon or late to all our dwellings come the spectres of the mind,
Doubts and fears and dread forebodings, in the darkness undefined;
Round us throng the grim projections of the heart and of the brain,
And our pride of strength is weakness, and the cunning hand is vain.

In the dark we cry like children; and no answer from on high
Breaks the crystal spheres of silence, and no white wings downward fly;
But the heavenly help we pray for comes to faith, and not to sight,
And our prayers themselves drive backward all the spirits of the night!