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THE STORY  
OF  
JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER  
FOR YOUNG READERS

BY  
SHERWIN CODY



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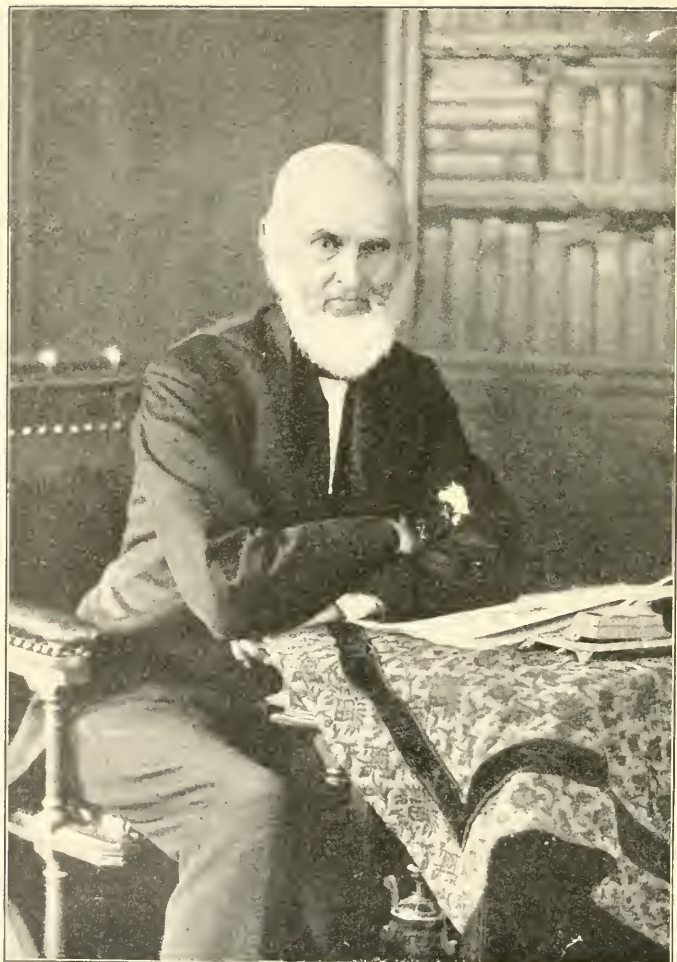
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*JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER.*

# WHITTIER

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## CHAPTER I

### THE QUAKER OF THE OLDEN TIME

The Quaker of the olden time!

How calm and firm and true,

Unspotted by its wrong and crime,

He walk'd the dark earth through!

The Quaker, with his broad-brimmed hat, his queer, old-fashioned coat, and his habit of saying "thee must" and "thee must not," was not only an honest man, but a good-natured, sensible man as well. The poet Whittier was a good Quaker, as "calm and firm and true" as the Quaker in his poem. He was also fond of children, and his best poems are about children and childhood days.

It is only a little over two hundred years since the first Quakers appeared. Whittier's great-great-

grandfather, Thomas Whittier, was said to be a Huguenot by descent. He came from England, however, as a Puritan, and held various offices in the Puritan church in Salisbury and Haverhill, in northeastern Massachusetts, where he settled.

It happened that two Quakers, Joseph Peasley and Thomas Macy, who had come to Haverhill, were arrested and fined for "exhorting" on the Lord's day. They did it in their own houses; but in those Puritan times, all the exhorting had to be done in church by regular ministers. Thomas Whittier thought these men had been treated rather unjustly, and he and others petitioned the legislature, or General Court, to pardon them. But the old Puritans thought these petitioners about as bad as the "heretics" themselves, as the Quakers were regarded, and notified them that they must take back their petition or be punished. Thomas Whittier and Christopher Hussey, though not Quakers, refused, and were deprived of their right to vote, or, as it was called, "their rights as freemen."

Thomas Whittier was such a good, sensible man, however, that the people, although he was sus-

pended from voting, had to ask him to help them do various things in the church; and after a while the General Court restored his "rights as a freeman." He himself never became a Quaker, but his son married a daughter of Joseph Peasley, and so most of the Whittiers after that were Quakers. Yet there were some who were not; for history tells of a Colonel Whittier about the time of the Revolution. He could not have been a Quaker, for no good Quaker ever goes into the army.

The Quakers are a peculiar people. They do not believe in fighting or going to war on any account. They are always for peace. The poet Whittier was opposed to war, and often wrote against it; and he refused to favor the Civil War, which freed the slaves, although he had himself been for many years a great anti-slavery reformer, along with his friend William Lloyd Garrison. But he admits that he had a sort of diabolical liking for the army and war, and once he wrote a war poem and had it published anonymously. He thought no one would ever know who wrote it, for it didn't sound much like a Quaker; but when he had

become an old man some one did find it out, and he had to admit that he was its author.

Another thing the Quakers will not do is to swear, either in a profane way, or before a court of justice. They declare that the Scriptures say, "Swear not at all," and that it is just as wrong to swear in court as in anger. They are not great talkers; and in meeting, if no one has anything to say that is worth saying, they think it much better to sit in silence for an hour than to listen to a dull sermon.

Your grammars will tell you that it is just as incorrect to say "thee is," or "thee must," as it is to say "me is," or "him ought." It seems strange that most of the Quakers in the world, from the earliest time, should make a grammatical blunder like this. Of course Whittier, and many others, knew it was not correct; but they said that Quakers had used this form of speech from the very first, and they would not try to change the custom.

These queer people also said they were plain, sensible folk, and therefore would not cater to the "world and the devil" by wearing fine clothes. All dressed in the same way, in what was called

Quaker drab, the men with broad-brimmed beaver hats, the women with plain bonnets of black or "dove-colored" silk, unadorned with ribbons or other ornaments.

Neither did they have any music, nor indulge themselves in any unnecessary luxuries. They were sharp and shrewd, however, and as we shall see in the case of Whittier, did not forbear to have a little fun now and then.

The Puritans had revolted from the Church of England, and came to America for religious freedom. The Quakers had likewise revolted from the established forms of worship, but their belief was very different from that of the Puritans.

At first the Puritans in Massachusetts thought they would keep the Quakers out of their colony. They therefore punished severely every one who dared to come among them. They condemned four of them to death, and others they whipped and imprisoned and banished. But these persecutions did not prevent the Quakers from coming to Massachusetts, and finally the Puritans became ashamed of their intolerance, and left them to themselves.

## CHAPTER II

## A FARMER'S BOY

The first Thomas Whittier, after he married, built a log house, not far from the present Whittier homestead; but when he grew old and became well-to-do he put up what was then a fine house. This was as long ago as 1688, or thereabouts.

In this house, which is still standing, the poet John Greenleaf Whittier was born, December 17, 1807. His father was nearly fifty at the time of his birth, and twenty-one years older than his mother. His grandfather was about the same age when his father was born, and his great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather were equally old at the births of their sons.

On his mother's side Whittier was descended from a remarkable old preacher named Stephen Bachiler. This man had deep-set, bright eyes, and handsome features, which were inherited by most of his descendants, many of whom became famous men. One was Daniel Webster, who



looked very much indeed like Whittier. Both had the Bachelor eye and brow.

New England farm life is not easy or pleasant, though Whittier never admitted that he didn't have a first-rate time when he was a boy, as you may see by reading "Snow-Bound." His father's family had to raise most of the food they ate. They had no comfortable sofas, and the chairs were very straight-backed. Besides, they did not succeed very well in keeping warm in the winter. As they thought it was necessary to toughen themselves, they went out on very cold days without much clothing on. Indeed, they probably had but very few warm clothes. There were no such things in those days as heavy flannels or great overcoats. The cloth in their garments was spun and woven at home by the mother, and she did not always get the threads very close together. So there were a great many spaces for the wind to blow through. Of course they had to go to meeting every First-day (Sunday), and as there were no fires in the meeting-house, they suffered much from the cold in winter.

Even the dwelling houses were not very warm. There was only one fire, and it was built in a chimney-place so large that there was room for benches inside the chimney next to the fire. Then the wind would come in through the cracks and crevices; and while it was very hot before the fireplace, a little way back it was cold. It would often happen on cold, windy nights that their faces would burn while their backs were almost freezing. And the bedrooms were like ice-chests, and never warm except in summer, when they were sure to be too hot. Whittier was sickly all the latter part of his life; and he laid his trouble largely to exposure in childhood; for he was always delicate. He lived to be very old, however, as did all his ancestors.

This was the unpleasant side to his boyhood; of the pleasant side Whittier himself has told us. If you wish to know what good times he had in the summer season, read the "Barefoot Boy":

Blessings on thee, little man,  
 Barefoot boy with cheeks of tan! . . .  
 From my heart I give thee joy—  
 I was once a barefoot boy!

It is only the country boy who knows—

How the tortoise bears his shell,  
 How the woodchuck digs his cell,  
 And the ground-mole sinks his well;  
 How the robin feeds her young,  
 How the oriole's nest is hung;  
 Where the whitest lilies blow,  
 Where the freshest berries grow,  
 Where the groundnut trails its vine,  
 Where the wood-grape's clusters shine.

But it is in "Snow-Bound," his greatest and most beautiful poem, that we hear of all the pleasant times which the farm boy has in winter, and also all about the members of Whittier's own family. He begins the poem by telling how the snowstorm came up, and then goes on—

Meanwhile we did our nightly chores,—  
 Brought in the wood from out of doors,  
 Littered the stalls, and from the mows  
 Raked down the herd's-grass for the cows.

Every farmer boy knows what "chores" are. The fun came the next morning when their father,

“a prompt, decisive man,” wasting no breath, said,  
“Boys, a path!” You must go to the poem itself  
to read about the Aladdin’s cave they dug in the  
snow, and the other things they did. “As night  
drew on,” says the poet,

We piled with care our nightly stack  
Of wood against the chimney back,—  
The oaken log, green, huge and thick,  
And on its top the stout back stick;  
The knotty forestick laid apart,  
And filled between with curious art  
The ragged brush; then, hovering near,  
We watched the first red blaze appear,  
Heard the sharp crackle, caught the gleam  
On whitewashed wall and sagging beam,  
Until the old, rude-furnished room,  
Burst flower-like into rosy bloom. . . .  
Shut in from all the world without,  
We sat the clean-winged hearth about,  
Content to let the north wind roar  
In baffled rage at pane and door;  
While the red logs before us beat  
The frost line back with tropic heat;  
And ever, when a louder blast  
Shook beam and rafter as it passed,

The merrier up its roaring draught  
The great throat of the chimney laughed.  
The house dog on his paws outspread  
Laid to the fire his drowsy head,  
The cat's dark silhouette on the wall  
A couchant tiger's seemed to fall;  
And, for the winter fireside meet,  
Between the andirons' straddling feet,  
The mug of cider simmered slow,  
The apples sputtered in a row,  
And, close at hand, the basket stood  
With nuts from brown October's wood.

Whittier was nearly sixty years old when he wrote this poem, and perhaps he had forgotten partly the hardships of his boyhood; but the poem is so great because it is so simple and natural and true. It may seem strange that the greatest work of a great poet is no more than a description of his every-day home when he was a boy. Whittier's home was not finer nor better than anybody else's home—than yours or mine; in fact, in comparison with what we have, it was very poor indeed. Yet Whittier made this wonderful poem about it. That shows how great a poet he was. Only a great

poet could take a barefoot boy, or a snowstorm, or a common farmhouse and write such beautiful verses about it. Think of this carefully, and you will come to understand what good poetry really is.

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## CHAPTER III

### WHITTIER'S FAMILY

Most people are blessed with brothers and sisters, with whom they grow up. First one and then the other is sent away to school. Soon they are all out in the world, earning livings for themselves; they get married and have families of their own; and before long they seem to forget the home of their childhood. But Whittier did not get married, and one of his sisters did not marry. He lived on the farm most of the time till he was thirty years old, when he moved with his mother and sister to Amesbury. We are therefore more than usually interested in knowing about the members of the family in which he was born.

First, there was his father. He was a plain,

matter-of-fact man, and did not believe in poetry; and so, in this, young Greenleaf received very little encouragement from him.

The encouragement in his poetic efforts, which the father failed to give, he got from his mother, sisters, and brother, who were all proud of him. His mother was a dear, sweet Quaker lady, as saintly as she was lovely. Her face was full and fair, and she had fine, dark eyes. She appreciated poetry and all fine and delicate sentiments, and for fifty years she was the guide, counselor, and friend of her illustrious son.

Greenleaf had a brother, Matthew Franklin, several years younger than himself, who outlived every one else in the family except the poet. He had also two sisters, the eldest of the family, and the youngest. The elder sister, Mary, married and lived in Haverhill; but the younger never married, and was the poet's intimate friend and house-keeper until both were old. In "Snow-Bound" the reader will find this beautiful description of her, lines as sweet and beautiful as the poet ever wrote:

Upon the motley-braided mat  
 Our youngest and our dearest sat,  
 Lifting her large, sweet, asking eyes,  
     Now bathed within the fadeless green  
 And holy peace of Paradise. . . . .  
 I tread the pleasant paths we trod,  
 I see the violet-sprinkled sod  
 Whereon she leaned, too frail and weak  
 The hillside flowers she loved to seek,  
 Yet following me where'er I went  
 With dark eyes full of love's content.

. . . . .  
 And yet, dear heart! remembering thee,  
     Am I not richer than of old?  
 Safe in thy immortality,  
     What change can reach the wealth I hold?  
     What chance can mar the pearl and gold  
 Thy love hath left in trust with me?—  
 And when the sunset gates unbar,  
     Shall I not see thee waiting stand,  
 And, white against the evening star,  
     The welcome of thy beckoning hand?

The poem "Snow-Bound" was written perhaps as a memorial of her. He and she had been for fifty years as loving and fond as husband and



wife, but held together by a purer, more spiritual bond.

She was a poet like her brother; and to this day, in any complete edition of Whittier's poems you will find, towards the end of the volume, "Poems by Elizabeth H. Whittier," which he wished to be always printed with his.

In this family there were two other kindly souls. One was Uncle Moses, a brother of the poet's father, "innocent of books, but rich in lore of fields and brooks." The other was Aunt Mercy, Mrs. Whittier's sister:—

The sweetest woman ever Fate  
 Perverse denied a household mate,  
 Who, lonely, homeless, not the less  
 Found peace in love's unselfishness,  
 And welcome wheresoe'er she went.

Such was the Whittier family, all good Quakers, dressing in Quaker fashion, and talking in the quaint Quaker way; but they were all cheerful and ready for enjoyment, and all were fond and devoted and gentle and ambitious to live well.

## CHAPTER IV

## STORIES OF THE POET'S CHILDHOOD

The Whittiers seem to have been a simple-minded family. Some stories told of the poet in his childhood would almost make you think him stupid, but no one seems ever to interpret them in that way.

He remembered nothing that happened before he was six years old; but about that time he heard that a neighboring farm had been sold at auction. The next morning he went out and was surprised to find the land still there, instead of a big hole in the ground; for he seemed to think that after the farm was sold it would be taken away.

When he was nine years old, President Monroe visited Haverhill, and happened to be there on the same day that a menagerie came to town. The Quaker boy was not allowed to see either. He thought he did not care much for the wild beasts, but he would have liked to see the greatest man in the United States. The next day he trudged over

to the village, hoping to see at least some footprints that the great man had left behind him. He found at last the impressions of an elephant's feet in the road, and supposing these to be the tracks of the President, he followed them as far as he could make them out. Then he went home satisfied that he had seen the footsteps of the greatest man in the country.

At another time he and his brother calculated that if each could lift the other by his boot straps, first one lifting and then the other, they might lift themselves up to the ceiling, and no telling how much higher. Of course when they tried it they didn't get very far.

In later life he used to tell a story of how children sometimes suffer needlessly, and in ways of which their parents little dream. When he went to ride with his father, they used to walk up a certain hill, in order to rest the horse. By the side of the road there was a gander, which had come out from a neighboring farmyard; and he says he would rather in later life have walked up to a hostile cannon than as a child go by that gander. But he

was ashamed to let his father know his fear, and so walked past in an agony of dread.

There is also told an interesting story of an ox named Old Butler. One day Greenleaf went out with some salt for the oxen. He was climbing up the side of a steep hill when Old Butler, on top, saw him, and came plunging down. The hill was so steep that the ox could not stop, and in a moment he would have crushed the young master; but gathering himself together at the right moment, the creature by a great effort leaped straight out into the air over the head of the boy. It was the wonderful intelligence of this ox that saved young Greenleaf's life.

Another amusing story is also told of this ox. Once a Quaker meeting was being held in the kitchen. Unexpectedly the ox stuck his head in at the window. While a sweet-voiced sister was speaking he listened quietly; but when a loud-voiced brother began to speak, he drew out his head, flung up his tail, and went off bellowing. This the children thought very funny and a good joke on the brother.

## CHAPTER V

## SCHOOL DAYS

Brisk wielder of the birch and rule,  
 The master of the district school  
 Held at the fire his favored place.  
 Its warm glow lit a laughing face,  
 Fresh-hued and fair, where scarce appeared  
 The uncertain prophecy of beard.  
 He teased the mitten-blinded cat,  
 Played cross-pins on my uncle's hat,  
 Sang songs, and told us what befalls  
 In classic Dartmouth's college halls.

A careless boy that night he seemed;  
     But at his desk he had the look  
 And air of one who wisely schemed,  
     And hostage from the future took  
     In trained thought and lore of book.  
 Large-brained, clear-eyed—of such as he  
 Shall Freedom's young apostles be.

—*Snow-Bound.*

Until he was nineteen Whittier went only to the

district school, and he used to say that in all that time only two of the teachers were worth anything at all. Both of these were Dartmouth students, and are fairly well described in the above quotation from "Snow-Bound." One was Joshua Coffin, Whittier's first teacher. He came back again some years later, and often spent his evenings at the Whittier homestead. In later years he was the poet's friend and helper in the antislavery cause.

Little Greenleaf started to school when he was very small, and before he had learned his letters. Among his poems is a sweet little one, entitled "In School Days." He begins by describing the schoolhouse:

Within, the master's desk is seen,  
Deep scarred by raps official;  
The warping floor, the battered seats,  
The jack-knife's carved initial.

You must read for yourself the story of the little boy and the little girl, and how the latter said:

“I ’m sorry that I spelt the word:  
I hate to go above you,  
Because,” —the brown eyes lower fell,—  
“Because, you see, I love you!”

Of books to read they had not many in the Whittier household, and most of them were the works of saintly Quakers. The Bible was the chief book, and that they read until they had it by heart. Joshua Coffin used to bring various books which he had and read them aloud to the older people, not paying much attention to the boy of fifteen who sat in the corner and listened. Once he brought a volume of Burns’s poems and read page after page, explaining the Scotch dialect. Greenleaf, then a tall, shy lad, listened spellbound. He had got into what his Uncle Moses called his “stood.” The teacher saw that he was interested, and offered to leave the book with him. That was about the first good poetry he had ever heard. It kindled the fire of poetic genius in his own mind and heart, and he soon began to write poetry himself. But he was only a farmer’s lad, and writing

poetry does not come easy to one in such surroundings.

While he was in his teens he made his first visit to Boston, staying with a relative who was postmaster of the city. You may imagine how he looked, a gawky country boy, with broad-brimmed Quaker hat and plain, homespun clothes. But he wore for the first time in his life "boughten buttons" on his coat, and his Quaker hat had been covered by his Aunt Mercy with drab velvet. These made him feel very fine.

He was induced to buy a copy of Shakespeare; and at the table of his relative was a brilliant lady, who was very kind to him. He had been warned against the temptations of the town, and you can imagine how shocked he was to find out that this fine lady was an actress. She invited him to go to the theater; but he hastily declined, and was almost ashamed of himself for having bought a volume of plays, even if they were Shakespeare's.

Somehow or other a copy of one of the Waverley novels came into the Quaker home, and Whittier and his sister read it together without letting their



parents know. They read late into the night; and at one time, just as they were getting to an exciting part, the candle burned out and they had to go to bed in the dark, for it was quite impossible to get another.

There is a story that Whittier's first verses were written on the beam of his mother's loom. At any rate he wrote verses on his slate in school, and passed them around among the scholars. One stanza his sister remembered, and repeated afterward:

And must I always swing the flail,  
And help to fill the milking-pail?  
I wish to go away to school;  
I do not wish to be a fool.

The desk on which the poet wrote his first verses was built by that original Thomas Whittier, more than a hundred years before Greenleaf was born. It stood in the kitchen for many years; then it was packed away. But a few years before Whittier died, a niece of his had it taken out and repaired, and he used it until the end of his life.

In those old days his sister Mary thought his verses exceedingly fine, quite as good as those she read in the "Poet's Corner" of the *Free Press*. This paper had just been started in Newburyport by William Lloyd Garrison, who was only three years older than Whittier, but had had every advantage of education. John Whittier, the father, liked the solid tone of it, and subscribed. Without letting her brother know, Mary got one of his poems and sent it anonymously to the editor of the paper. When, a week or so afterward, the postman came along by the field where the Whittiers were at work and flung the paper over the fence, Greenleaf looked at once to see what was in the "Poet's Corner," and was immensely surprised to see his own poem there. He says he simply stood and stared at it, without reading a word. His father suggested that he had better go to work; but he couldn't help opening the paper again and looking at his own poem.

Another poem was sent, and Garrison wrote a note to introduce it, in which he said: "His poetry bears the stamp of true poetic genius, which, if

carefully cultivated, will rank him among the bards of his country." How strange a prophecy, and how strange the fortune that brought together the great reformer, William Lloyd Garrison, and the great poet, John Greenleaf Whittier, when both were so young and inexperienced!

---

## CHAPTER VI

### HAVERHILL ACADEMY

It was a happy day for Whittier when his sister sent that stolen poem to the paper edited by William Lloyd Garrison, for Garrison immediately took a fancy to the author. After printing the second poem sent, he learned from what part of Haverhill the poems came, and drove out fourteen miles to see the young author.

He was a neatly dressed, handsome, and affable young gentleman, and came with a lady friend. As it was a hot summer day, Whittier was at work in the fields, wearing doubtless little beside an old straw hat, a shirt, and a pair of overalls. His bash-

fulness made him wish to avoid seeing the fine city visitor; but his sister persuaded him. He slipped in at the back door and changed his clothes, and a long and interesting visit with Garrison followed. They became fast friends, and in later years were workers together in the cause of the slave.

Friend Whittier, the old gentleman, came into the room while the two were having their first talk, and Garrison told him he ought to send his son away to school. The old gentleman was not at all pleased by the turn affairs were taking, and told young Garrison that he ought not to put such notions into the boy's head. As we have already said, Friend Whittier, being a matter-of-fact Quaker, did not approve of poetry anyway.

So this time passed by, and Greenleaf was kept at work on the farm. Garrison gave up his paper in Newburyport and went to Boston, and the young poet sent his verses to the *Haverhill Gazette*. A Mr. Thayer was the editor of this paper, and he conceived the same opinion of the lad that Garrison had. He also went to the old gentleman and urged him to give his son a classical education. An acad-

emy was to be opened in Haverhill that fall, and young Whittier could attend it and spend part of each week at home. Two years before, Greenleaf had seriously injured himself by undertaking some very hard work on the farm; indeed from this strain he suffered all his life. On account of this, his father considered the matter more favorably.

Mr. Thayer, the editor, promised to board the young man in his family; but it was a serious question as to where the small amount of money needed was to come from. There was a mortgage of \$600 on the farm, and nearly all the ready money that could be obtained went to pay taxes and interest on the debt. The young man received permission to attend the academy; but he must pay his own way.

It was not an easy thing to pick up spare change in those days, as the elder Whittier well knew; but Greenleaf looked cheerfully about. An opportunity soon appeared. A hired man on his father's farm occupied his winters in making a kind of cheap slippers, which he sold for twenty-five cents a pair. He promised to teach the young poet the art of

making them. It was not hard to learn. During the winter of 1826-27 he made enough to keep him at the academy six months. He calculated so closely that he thought he would have twenty-five cents more than enough to pay his expenses of board, books, and clothes. At the end of the term, sure enough, he had that twenty-five cents left.

James F. Otis, a noted lawyer, read some of Whittier's poems, and, like Garrison, determined to go and find him. He was told that he was a shoemaker in Haverhill. He says that he found him at work in his shoe shop, and making himself known to him, they spent the day together in wandering over the hills, and on the shores of the Merrimac River, talking about matters literary. Like Garrison, Otis later became an intimate friend of Whittier.

When the Haverhill academy was opened, Whittier was not only to become a pupil; but he contributed the ode that was sung. This gave him a sort of social send-off in the town, and henceforth he was something of a personage in Haverhill. In the year 1827 he contributed forty-seven

poems to the *Haverhill Gazette* alone, and forty-nine in 1828.

So the young poet that William Lloyd Garrison discovered and went fourteen miles to see was beginning to become famous.

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## CHAPTER VII

### THE FRIENDSHIP OF GOOD WOMEN

If Whittier ever had a real love affair, no one seems to have known about it. The fact is, he was not of the passionate kind. But all his life his best friends were women, and many a good woman he knew and was fond of, and he and she became real friends. And of that friendship with him, all those women, without exception, were proud indeed. In a letter written a dozen years after his school life began, he says:

“For myself, I owe much to the kind encouragement of female friends. A bashful, ignorant boy, I was favored by the kindness of a lady who saw, or thought she saw, beneath the clownish exterior

something which gave promise of intellect and worth. [This was the wife of Mr. Thayer, with whom he boarded.] The powers of my own mind, the mysteries of my own spirit, were revealed to myself, only as they were called out by one of those dangerous relations called cousins, who, with all her boarding school glories upon her, condescended to smile upon my rustic simplicity. She was so learned in the, to me, more than occult mysteries of verbs and nouns, and philosophy, and botany, and mineralogy, and French, and all that, and then she had seen something of society, and could talk (an accomplishment at that time to which I could lay no claim), that on the whole I looked upon her as a being to obtain whose good opinion no effort could be too great."

One of these young lady friends, perhaps the very cousin of whom he speaks, wrote of him years afterwards:

"He was nearly nineteen when I first saw him. He was a very handsome, distinguished-looking young man. His eyes were remarkably beautiful. He was tall, slight, and very erect; a bashful



youth, but never awkward, my mother said, who was a better judge of such matters than I. . . .

“With intimate friends he talked a great deal, and in a wonderfully interesting manner; usually earnest, and frequently playful. He had a great deal of wit. It was a family characteristic. . . . The influence of his Quaker bringing-up was manifest. I think it was always his endeavor

to render less

The sum of human wretchedness.

This, I say, was his steadfast endeavor, in spite of his inborn love of teasing. He was very modest, never conceited, never egotistic. One could never flatter him. I never tried, but I have seen people attempt it, and it was a signal failure. He did not flatter, but told some very wholesome and unpalatable truths.”

An amusing story is told of Whittier's love of teasing. At the time it happened he must have been between thirty and forty. A Quaker sister named Sophronia Page, who went about preaching to little gatherings of the Friends, stopped one night at his mother's house. As most Quaker

bonnets are precisely alike, there is no way of telling them apart except by the name inside. When Sophronia Page went away she put on Mrs. Whittier's bonnet by mistake. When she got to the next stopping place and saw the name inside, she sent the bonnet back. Whittier noticed it in a box in the hall, and thought he would have some fun with his mother.

"What does thee think Sophronia Page has done?" he asked her, sitting down.

"I don't know, Greenleaf," she said quietly. "What is it?"

"Something I'm much afraid she will be called up in Yearly Meeting for."

"I hope she hasn't been meddling with the troubles of the Friends," said Mrs. Whittier, anxiously, referring to some church quarrels.

"Worse than that!" said the young man, while his mother got more and more excited. "She has been taking other people's things, and has just begun to send some of them back."

With that he went into the hall and brought back the bonnet.

“If thee were twenty years younger I would take thee over my knee!” said his mother when she saw what it was all about.

Among his other famous women friends was Mrs. Sigourney, the poetess, with whom he became acquainted in Hartford while he was editing a paper there. He also knew Lucy Larcom; and it was said at one time that he was engaged to marry Lucy Hooper, but there was no truth in this. Her death, shortly afterwards, made him feel very sad. In his poetic works you may find poems addressed to both these women.

While speaking of women we must not omit a description of that woman who was to him dearest of all women in the world, his sister Lizzie. This gifted sister Lizzie was “the pet and pride of the household, one of the rarest women, her brother’s complement, possessing all the readiness of speech and facility of intercourse which he wanted; taking easily in his presence the lead in conversation, which the poet so gladly abandoned to her, while he sat rubbing his hands and laughing at her daring sallies. She was as unlike him in person as

in mind; for his dignified erectness, she had endless motion and vivacity; for his regular and handsome features, she had a long Jewish nose, so full of expression that it seemed to enhance, instead of injuring, the effect of the large and liquid eyes that glowed with merriment and sympathy behind it. . . . Her quick thoughts came like javelins; a saucy triumph gleamed in her great eyes; the head moved a little from side to side with the quiver of a weapon, and lo! you were transfixed."

During his long life this sister was to Whittier more than sweetheart or wife, for she had the wit and the sympathy of all womankind in her one frail form; and Whittier knew it and depended on it for his happiness.

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## CHAPTER VIII

### POLITICAL AMBITION

Young Whittier remained at Haverhill academy only two terms. We have seen that he paid for the first one by making shoes. The second he paid for by teaching school. When he went to the

committee to be examined for this school he felt rather nervous; but the committee asked him only for a specimen of his handwriting, which was very neat and clear.

He decided not to go to college, because he said he wouldn't live on the charities of others, and it would have been impossible to get through college without borrowing money of friends. Poor as he was, Whittier never borrowed money.

While in Haverhill he wrote a great many poems and articles for the local newspaper. Garrison was then in Boston editing a temperance paper. But soon he thought he had something better in view, and concluded to turn the editorship over to Whittier. Whittier accepted the position and went to Boston; but he was to edit the *Manufacturer*, not the *Philanthropist*. Both were published by the same people. This is the way he writes about his work:

“The *Manufacturer* goes down well, thanks to the gullibility of the public, and we are doing well, very well. Have had one or two rubs from other papers, but I have had some compliments which

were quite as much as my vanity could swallow. Have tolerable good society, Mrs. Hale and her literary club, etc. I am coming out for the tariff by and by—have done something at it already—but the *astonisher* is yet to come! Shall blow Cambreling and McDuffie sky-high.”

Cambreling and McDuffie were politicians whom he was going to oppose.

We should hardly think that the gentle poet Whittier, Quaker as he was, would conceive the ambition to become a politician; but he was editing a political newspaper, and soon got deep into politics and liked it.

He had not been in Boston long when, his father becoming ill, he went back to the farm and remained there until the old gentleman died, in June, 1830. He spent all his time in study and writing, however, and after his father's death he was asked to edit a political paper in Hartford, Connecticut. He didn't know anything of Connecticut politics; but he took hold and learned how matters stood. Everybody liked and he made some excellent friends there.

Of course rival political newspapers are always saying sharp things about one another. After he had been in Hartford a few weeks he opened a copy of the *Catskill Recorder* and saw a long article headed "John G. Whittier," in which he was abused and ridiculed unmercifully. He hid the paper so that no one should see it, and went around in fear and trembling, thinking every one would know about it. Finally he wrote to the editor of the paper, protesting; but the editor had another paragraph, saying that, if he was as "thin-skinned" as that, he had better keep out of politics. Soon after this the New York papers, among them Bryant's *Evening Post*, spoke of him and his editorship in a very complimentary manner, and he felt better.

The fact is, Whittier was a good politician. He managed affairs in Haverhill for years, and had a sort of party of his own which controlled things. Once on election day a tipsy man asked for a ride with him into town, and said that if Whittier would give him the ride he would vote for his candidate. Usually the man had voted on the other side.

Whittier said, "All right," and took him along. He supported the man to the polls, put the right ballot in his hand, and told him to vote. But the fellow was so intoxicated he was obstinate, and determined to vote the other way. At the last moment somebody handed him the wrong ballot, and he put it in the box.

There was in Haverhill district a politician who did not really belong to Whittier's party, but who had always been elected after giving written pledges. After he had been elected in this way for several terms, and had been forced by Whittier to live up to his promises, he determined to go in without pledges. Whittier was away, and so he wrote a noncommittal letter, referring to his past record, and saying he didn't intend to pledge himself any further. But Whittier came back in the nick of time, saw the danger, and went over to see the man, whose name was Caleb Cushing. Whittier told him he would not be elected unless he signed the desired pledges. After a while he said he would sign anything Whittier wrote. So the young politician sat down and wrote a letter, which



Mr. Cushing copied and signed. It was printed as a circular and sent all around town, and Cushing was elected. Then after he was elected Whittier watched him closely, and saw that he made good the promises in that letter. Some time after, he was on the point of being made a cabinet officer by the party to which Whittier was opposed; but by the use of this letter Whittier prevented it.

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## CHAPTER IX

### THE GREAT QUESTION OF SLAVERY

It is altogether probable that Whittier would have been elected to Congress, and have had perhaps a great political career, had it not been for an act of genuine sacrifice on his part, made for the sake of right and conscience.

In 1833 Garrison pointed out to him that the country must be roused on the question of slavery. As a good Quaker, Whittier was already an abolitionist. He felt deeply the insufferable wrong

that American citizens, even though black, should be slaves under the whip of a master. In an early poem he cries passionately:

What, ho!—our countryman in chains!  
 The whip on woman's shrinking flesh!  
 Our soil yet reddening with the stains  
 Caught from her scourging warm and fresh!  
 What! mothers from their children riven!  
 What! God's own image bought and sold!  
*Americans* to market driven,  
 And bartered as the brute for gold!

When Garrison's appeal came, Whittier was at home on the farm, having given up the editorship of the Hartford paper on account of illness. Caleb Cushing, seven years younger than he, had come home from Europe and through Whittier's influence had been elected to Congress. Whittier's own name was being mentioned. A life of political ambition seemed to lie open before him. But with Garrison's appeal, he began a thorough and careful investigation of the question of slavery and its abolition in the United States. At last he wrote

a pamphlet entitled "Justice and Expediency." It was a brilliant defense of the antislavery position. This he had published at his own expense, poor as he was. When it was about ready to appear he hesitated, and considered the situation carefully. The abolitionists were a poor, despised party. If he cast in his lot with them, none of the great political parties would have anything to do with him: he must give up his political ambition, and devote himself to a cause that would require years for its success, even if it should ever succeed.

In after times a boy of fifteen, who was ambitious in a political way, came to him for advice. Whittier said that as a young man his ideal had been the life of a prominent politician. From this he had been persuaded only by the appeals of his friends—chiefly Garrison. Taking their advice, he had united with the persecuted and obscure band of abolitionists, and to this course he attributed all his after success in life. Then, turning to the boy, he placed his hand on his head, and said in his gentle voice: "My lad, if thou

wouldst win success, join thyself to some unpopular but noble cause."

From this time on, for thirty years, Whittier continued to be a very poor man. He made anti-slavery speeches sometimes, edited antislavery papers, wrote antislavery poems, was secretary of antislavery societies. For all this he was paid very little, and at the same time his health was poor. He sold the farm which had been his father's, and moved to Amesbury, where he lived for the remainder of his life.

His mother and his sister approved of his course, and supported him in every way. Their enthusiastic help made his life even pleasant. He thought nothing of poverty or hardship, but only of the great work into which he had thrown himself. At one time he thought he must mortgage his home; but a friend came to his assistance, and at last in his old age he had money and comfort and all that success brings with it.

From this time on, Whittier went through times of terrible struggle and conflict. Garrison had started his well-known paper, the *Liberator*, in Boston. To

it Whittier contributed the poem from which we have quoted the verse on page 44. In 1835 he was elected to the legislature by his fellow townsmen of Haverhill.

While attending a special session of the legislature that year, he saw the mob which came near hanging Garrison, and saw the rope about his friend's neck as the crowd hurried him around the corner of a street. The riot started in an attempt to break up a meeting of the Female Antislavery Society, which Whittier's sister was attending. When he heard of the outbreak he hurried off to the rescue of his sister; but she and the other women had escaped; and the police finally saved Garrison and took him to the jail for protection.

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## CHAPTER X

### HOW WHITTIER WAS MOBBED

We must now mention a few exciting events in which Whittier himself took part. At the time of the occurrences referred to in the last chapter, George Thompson, an eloquent English reformer

who had helped to secure the abolition of slavery in the British colonies, came to Boston to speak against slavery in the United States. It happened that the good people of the churches thought that the easy way to remove slavery was to send the slaves back to Africa, and for this they took up collections. Garrison and Whittier came out strongly against this weak-kneed plan, and George Thompson helped them. Of course, the church folk were angry; and all the business men were angry, because they said it spoiled business to stir up this agitation. As a result, the rough characters in every town saw a chance to have sport, and did all they could to break up the meetings of abolitionists. The good church people and all the well-to-do and solid members of the community were so angry that they wouldn't do anything to stop the mobs; and the result was that, wherever the speakers went, stones and rotten eggs were thrown at them, and abuse of all sorts was heaped upon them.

They got up a cry against George Thompson especially, that he was an Englishman who had

come over to try to steal American business; for in those days Americans were very jealous of England. They said Thompson's antislavery speeches were intended simply to stir up a quarrel between the Northern people and the Southern, so that England could step in and get their business. Handbills were thrown broadcast in Boston offering one hundred dollars to the first person that would lay violent hands on him.

The first mob was the one Whittier saw in Boston, from which his sister narrowly escaped. The rioters were after Thompson; but not finding him, they took Garrison instead.

A little later Thompson came to Haverhill and stopped with the Whittiers. He and the poet immediately set out on a tour into New Hampshire. With Thompson had come a clergyman named Samuel J. May. He was to have held a meeting one Sunday in the First Parish meeting-house in Concord, but the committee refused to allow him to speak on slavery, and another church was obtained.

At half-past seven he began to speak. Every

one was listening with breathless attention, when a stone came through a window. He paid no attention, but kept steadily on. In a moment another stone came through the pulpit window, and another big one fell among the audience and frightened them so they all started for the door. Rev. Mr. May then decided to close the meeting, and called to the people to receive the benediction.

It was a good thing he did so, for the steps of the church had been taken away, and if the crowd had poured out they would have fallen headlong. A heavily loaded cannon had also been brought up, and would have been used with terrible effect had the meeting lasted much longer. Whittier's sister took one arm of the clergyman, and another young lady the other, and they got him through the crowd without injury.

Whittier and Thompson had in the meantime gone to meet a still more violent mob. A man named George Kent arranged a meeting for them in Concord, Massachusetts, since famous as the home of Hawthorne and Emerson. Handbills



were circulated announcing that George Thompson and John G. Whittier would hold a meeting "at which the principles, views, and operations of the abolitionists would be explained." The selectmen warned the people who were promoting it that there would be trouble if they held it; but they persisted.

As the hour for the meeting approached, a great crowd gathered. The selectmen ordered that the doors should not be opened. Thereupon the crowd determined that they would find "the incendiary George Thompson," and punish him as he deserved; and, with loud threats, they accordingly set off for the house of George Kent and his "wine cellar."

On the way they met Whittier. They thought he was Thompson, in spite of his Quaker coat and the assurances of a gentleman who was with him that he was not the man, and began to pelt him with rotten eggs, mud, and stones. Whittier was only lamed a little; but his coat was spoiled by the decayed eggs so that he could not wear it any more. Years afterward, when clothes

were being sent to the negroes in the South, he donated this coat.

At last Whittier and his companion escaped into the house of Colonel Kent, a brother of George Kent, and the colonel convinced the crowd that Thompson was not there. They therefore pushed on to the house of George Kent, where he really was. Quite a little company of anti-slavery people had assembled there to see Thompson, among them two nieces of Daniel Webster. But when the crowd arrived, he had left the house by a back street.

When the mob found that he was gone, they went away to celebrate with fireworks and bonfires. In the meantime Whittier, anxious for his friend, changed his hat, and escaping through the crowd went to the house of George Kent. After a time Thompson came back. So did the crowd, all the time firing guns, throwing stones, and making a great noise.

At last, early in the morning, a horse and buggy were brought around to the back door, and Thompson and Whittier got into the vehicle.

Then the gates were thrown open, and, before the crowd knew what was being done, they drove away at a furious rate and escaped.

They drove fast; but the news had spread before them. They came to an inn at some distance from Concord. A number of men were telling about the riot, and exhibiting a handbill calling upon all good citizens to assist in capturing George Thompson and giving him his deserts.

“How will you recognize the rascal?” asked Whittier.

“Easily enough; he is a tonguey fellow,” said the landlord.

When they were in their carriage ready to drive away, Whittier said, “I am John G. Whittier, and this is George Thompson.”

The men stared at them until they were out of sight, but did not offer to lay hands on them.

A year or two later Whittier went to Philadelphia to edit an antislavery paper. The abolitionists had put up a large, fine building, called Pennsylvania Hall. Whittier moved his editorial office into it as soon as it was finished. A series of

meetings were at once held in it; but they did not last long, for one night a mob burned the building, and of course Whittier's office, with all his papers, was destroyed.

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## CHAPTER XI

### SOME OF WHITTIER'S FAMOUS POEMS

It is not necessary to tell all the events of those years of struggle and hardship and poverty. Whittier wrote a great many poems on slavery. A volume containing one hundred of them was published without his knowledge in 1837 by Isaac Knapp, publisher of the *Liberator* in Boston. It was entitled "Poems Written during the Progress of the Abolition Question in the United States, between the years 1830 and 1838. By John G. Whittier." He was in New York when it came out. It was the first edition of his poems ever published. The next year he edited a volume of antislavery poems entitled "The North Star," only a few of which he contributed. In 1839 the

financial agent of the antislavery society, Joseph Healy, published a volume of poems by Whittier. There were 180 pages in the book, half of which was devoted to poems on slavery, the remainder to miscellaneous poems.

So the years passed by, and Whittier and his friends kept up the great fight against slavery. The poet wrote hundreds of pieces, poetry and prose, which were published in all sorts of papers all over the country. Now he was at Haverhill in politics, always working for the cause of the slave, now in Philadelphia or somewhere else editing a paper; and again at his home in Amesbury recovering his health.

In the meantime the great cause to which he devoted himself moved steadily on until the Civil War came and all the negroes were set free. Whittier did not believe in war; but when it came he urged the Quakers, who were opposed to fighting, to become nurses, like the nuns and sisters of the Catholic church, and minister to the sick and wounded.

In 1857 the *Atlantic Monthly* was started in

Boston. All the great writers of the day were to have a hand in it—Longfellow, Lowell, Emerson, Holmes, and others. Whittier was also invited to take part, and an edition of his collected poems was published. The *Atlantic Monthly* paid more for contributions than most other periodicals in those days. Whittier got fifty dollars for each poem, and had a poem published nearly every month. He was in very delicate health at this time, and was so poor that this small amount was a godsend to him. He did not attend the monthly dinners in Boston, to which all the other literary men went, for he was a Quaker and did not approve of wine and luxuries; and besides he was not well enough to go. He sent his poems, however, with modest little notes, asking Lowell if he thought they would do, and telling him not to hesitate in rejecting them if he thought them silly. He seemed always to be afraid lest his beautiful simple poems would be so simple that some people would consider them foolish.

In 1858 his mother died, and now he lived

alone with his sister. She, too, died in 1864, the last year of the war, and the next year he wrote "Snow-Bound" as a sort of tribute to her memory. It was published in Boston in 1866 and at once proved very popular. Whittier made \$10,000 out of the royalties on it. His great regret was that his mother and sister had not lived to enjoy the benefit of his good fortune.

Two famous poems deserve mention. One is "Barbara Frietchie." A lady friend of Whittier heard the story in Washington, and at once said, "That is a beautiful subject for a ballad by Whittier. It is almost like a scrap of paper lying around with his signature on it." So she wrote it out and sent it to him. Not long after that he wrote the poem, following the original story almost exactly. Some people afterward declared that it was not true; but there was certainly an old German woman who kept the Union flag waving over the rebel troops.

The other poem is "The Barefoot Boy." Whittier wrote it in memory of his own boyhood. "For," says he, "I was once a barefoot boy." It pleased

him very much, and he sent it up to Mr. Fields, who was then editing the *Atlantic*, and asked "if he thought it would do." Mr. Fields thought it very fine, and said it must go into the edition of Whittier's works which he was then publishing.

Whittier was now sixty years old. The struggles of war and politics were over. The dear ones he loved were dead. To amuse and relieve himself he wrote those simple, beautiful ballads, which every person has read and admired. They were among the finest things he ever did. Among them were "Maud Muller," "Skipper Ireson's Ride," and others equally familiar. They were cheerful and happy, and some were about the days of his childhood. There was occasionally a tinge of sadness in them, but sadness mingled with hope.

Of all sad words of tongue or pen,  
The saddest are these: "It might have been!"

Ah, well! for us all some sweet hope lies  
Deeply buried from human eyes;

And, in the hereafter, angels may  
Roll the stone from its grave away!



Whittier's life *might have been* much easier and much happier. But he had helped much in the accomplishment of a great work, and he was not one to regret all his hardships and sufferings.

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## CHAPTER XII

### THE END OF A SUCCESSFUL LIFE

Before closing this short biography we must refer briefly to one or two interesting anecdotes and circumstances. Whittier was color-blind, at least as to red and green. He could see no difference between the color of ripe strawberries and the leaves of the vine. Yellow he thought the finest color in the world, and perhaps for this reason he preferred the golden-rod.

When the Peace Jubilee was to be celebrated after the Civil War, Patrick S. Gilmore, the famous bandmaster, asked Whittier to write an ode for the occasion. He declined, and then Gilmore offered a prize to the poet who would con-

tribute the best one. Whittier thought he would write one and send it anonymously. No notice was taken of it. Some people will point a moral to this tale by saying, "See what a reputation is!"

Whittier was very fond of pets. Once he had a gray parrot. It was trained on shipboard and would swear occasionally; but it soon fell into the quiet ways of its home. One Sunday morning, however, it got on top of the chimney while the church bells were ringing, and began to dance and scream and swear, while the poor Quakers inside the house came out and looked helplessly up at him, wondering how they would get him down. After that he fell down the chimney and remained in the soot two days. When he was discovered and taken out he was nearly starved, and died not long after.

Whittier also had a little bantam rooster which he trained to crow when he placed it at the door of his niece's room in the morning. Every morning Whittier would push open her door and put the rooster on top of it; and the little fowl would

crow lustily until his young mistress was quite awake.

One day not long after the war the Whittiers received a small box, and on opening it they were astonished to see little spikes sticking out all over. Whittier's niece at once guessed it must be an infernal machine, and took it out and buried it in the garden. A few days after there came a letter saying a paperweight, made out of the bullets from a famous battlefield, had been sent. Then they knew it must be the thing they thought an infernal machine, and went and dug it up; and after that it always stood on the poet's desk.

During the time of the war, Gail Hamilton, a friend of Whittier's, embroidered a pair of slippers for him. They were in Quaker gray, but on them was pictured a fierce eagle, with a bunch of thunderbolts in one claw. He was looking knowingly around, as much as to say that if he got a good chance when nobody was looking, he would hurl those thunderbolts. This was intended as a joke on Whittier, who was a Quaker and opposed to war, but still had a good deal of the warlike spirit

in him ready to break out at any moment. Whittier used to say, referring to the slippers, that Gail Hamilton was as sharp with her needle as with her tongue.

On the occasion of his seventieth birthday, Whittier was given a great dinner at the Hotel Brunswick in Boston. Nearly all the famous writers of the day were present. When it came the poet's turn to respond to the address of congratulation, he said Longfellow would read a short poem he had written. He handed a paper to that poet, who read the response.

After that, his birthdays were celebrated more or less regularly, and often Whittier had to make great efforts to escape the "pilgrims" who came to Amesbury to see him. Once a party of boys from Exeter Academy started over to visit him and get his autograph. By accident they were delayed, and when they reached his house it was the dead of night and the poet was in bed. He got up, however, and gave them hospitality, writing in all their books. Before he had finished, one of the boys said, "You have written only John in my book."

“I am afraid some of you haven't even got as much as that,” said he drily, and took up the candle and went off to bed.

He died on the 7th of September, 1892, at the house of some friends in New Hampshire, with whom he was staying.

We cannot close this account of the life of the dearest and sweetest of poets better than by quoting his own words about himself:

And while my words are read,  
 Let this at least be said:  
 “Whate'er his life's defeatures,  
 He loved his fellow-creatures.

. . . . .

“To all who humbly suffered,  
 His tongue and end he offered;  
 His life was not his own,  
 Nor lived for self alone.

“Hater of din and riot,  
 He lived in days unquiet;  
 And, lover of all beauty,  
 Trod the hard ways of duty.

“He meant no wrong to any,  
 He sought the good of many,  
 Yet knew both sin and folly,—  
 May God forgive him wholly!”

Also these lines from “My Soul and I”:

I have wrestled stoutly with the wrong,  
 And borne the right  
 From beneath the footfall of the throng  
 To life and light.

Wherever Freedom shivered a chain,  
 God speed, quoth I;  
 To Error amidst her shouting train  
 I gave the lie.

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"Many years ago, when this country of ours was one great forest, \* \* \* there dwelt a race of happy little children. The Red Children, we call them \* \* \* Some wise men, who loved the Red Children and saw the sweetness of their simple stories, gathered them together and told them in a book, so that you and I might read these legends of the Red Children."

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