



Anti-Slavery Poems: Songs of Labor and Reform (Anti-Slavery Poems and Songs of Slavery)

John Greenleaf Whittier

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Anti-Slavery Poems

Songs of Labor and Reform

Volumes I, II and III

By John Greenleaf Whittier

"The French ship *Le Rodeur*, with a crew of twenty-two men, and with one hundred and sixty negro slaves, sailed from Bonny, in Africa, April, 1819. On approaching the line, a terrible malady broke out,—an obstinate disease of the eyes,—contagious, and altogether beyond the resources of medicine. It was aggravated by the scarcity of water among the slaves (only half a wine-glass per day being allowed to an individual), and by the extreme impurity of the air in which they breathed. By the advice of the physician, they were brought upon deck occasionally; but some of the poor wretches, locking themselves in each other's arms, leaped overboard, in the hope, which so universally prevails among them, of being swiftly transported to their own homes in Africa. To check this, the captain ordered several who were stopped in the attempt to be shot, or hanged, before their companions. The disease extended to the crew; and one after another were smitten with it, until only one remained unaffected. Yet even this dreadful condition did not preclude calculation: to save the expense of supporting slaves rendered unsalable, and to obtain grounds for a claim against the underwriters, thirty-six of the negroes, having become blind, were thrown into the sea and drowned!" Speech of M. Benjamin Constant, in the French Chamber of Deputies, June 17, 1820.

Corpse after corpse came up,

Death had been busy there;

Where every blow is mercy,

Why should the spoiler spare?

Corpse after corpse they cast

Sullenly from the ship,

Yet bloody with the traces

Of fetter-link and whip.

Gloomily stood the captain,
With his arms upon his breast,
With his cold brow sternly knotted,
And his iron lip compressed.
"Are all the dead dogs over?"
Growled through that matted lip;
"The blind ones are no better,
Let's lighten the good ship."
Hark! from the ship's dark bosom,
The very sounds of hell!
The ringing clank of iron,
The maniac's short, sharp yell!
The hoarse, low curse, throat-stifled;
The starving infant's moan,
The horror of a breaking heart
Poured through a mother's groan.

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