



The Gloucester Leaguers

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Strange things had been reported in Gloucester. On the eve of King Philip's War the march of men was heard in its streets and an Indian bow and scalp were seen on the face of the moon, while the boom of cannon and roll of drums were heard at Malden and the windows of Plymouth rattled to the passage of unseen horsemen. But the strangest thing was the arrival on Cape Ann of a force of French and Indians that never could be caught, killed, or crippled, though two regiments were hurried into Gloucester and battled with them for a fortnight. Thus, the rumor went around that these were not an enemy of flesh and blood, but devils who hoped to work a moral perversion of the colony. From 1692, when they appeared, until Salem witchcraft was at an end, Cape Ann was under military and spiritual guard against "the spectre leaguers."

Another version of the episode, based on sworn evidence, has it that Ebenezer Babson, returning late on a summer night, saw two men run from his door and vanish in a field. His family denied that visitors had called, so he gave chase, for he believed the men to have a mischievous intention. As he left the threshold they sprang from behind a log, one saying to the other, "The master of the house is now come, else we might have taken the house," and again they disappeared in a swamp. Babson woke the guard, and on entering the quarters of the garrison the sound of many feet was heard without, but when the doors were flung open only the two men were visible and they were retreating. Next evening the yeoman was chased by these elusive gentry, who were believed to be scouts of the enemy, for they wore white breeches and waistcoats and carried bright guns.

For several nights they appeared, and on the 4th of July half a dozen of them were seen so plainly that the

soldiers made a sally, Babson bringing three of “ye unaccountable troublers” to the ground with a single shot, and getting a response in kind, for a bullet hissed by his ear and buried itself in a tree. When the company approached the place where lay the victims of that remarkable shot, behold, they arose and scampered away as blithely as if naught had happened to them. One of the trio was cornered and shot anew, but when they would pick him up he melted into air. There was fierce jabbering in an unknown tongue, through all the swamp, and by the time the garrison had returned the fellows were skulking in the shrubbery again. Richard Dolliver afterward came on eleven of them engaged in incantations and scattered them with a gunshot, but they would not down. They lurked about the cape until terror fell on all the people, remaining for “the best part of a month together,” so it was deemed that “Satan had set ambushments against the good people of Gloucester, with demons in the shape of armed Indians and Frenchmen.”

Stones were thrown, barns were beaten with clubs, the marching of unseen hosts was heard after dark, the mockers grew so bold that they ventured close to the redoubtable Babson, gazed scornfully down the barrel of his gun, and laid a charm on the weapon, so that, no matter how often he snapped it at them, it flashed in the pan. Neighboring garrisons were summoned, but all battling with goblins was fruitless. One night a dark and hostile throng emerged from the wood and moved toward the blockhouse, where twenty musketeers were keeping guard. “If you be ghosts or devils I will foil you,” cried the captain, and tearing a silver button from his doublet he rammed it into his gun and fired on the advancing host. Even as the smoke of his musket was blown on the wind, so did the beleaguering army vanish, the silver bullet proving that they were not of human kind. The night was wearing on when a cry went out that the devils were coming again. Arms were laid aside this time, and the watchers sank to their knees in prayer. Directly that the name of God was uttered the marching ceased and heaven rang with the howls of the angry fiends. Never again were leaguers seen in Gloucester.

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