

John Masefield (1878-1967)

2 *Cap on Head*

A Tale of the O'Neill

O'Neill took ship, O'Neill set sail,
And left his wife ashore
In the foursquare castle like a jail,
Between the Mull and the Gore.

Many a month he stayed away, 5
His lady sorrowed long;
She heard the tide come twice a day,
And the sea-lark at his song;

She watched the sun go down in the west, 10
And another day begin;
At nights she made her mate a nest,
But no mate came therein.

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One night a red light burned at sea,
A ship came into port,
A foot stirred and the horn was blown 15
Within the outer court.

It was all dark save up the brae
The dead moon wore her heel;
The watchman called, "Who 's there the day?"
A voice said, "The O'Neill." 20

The watchman flung the great gate back:
"Come in, lord, to your own."
O'Neill stood huddled up in black
Upon the threshold stone.

White as a riser from the dead 25
He passed the lintel post.

“God spare us, lord!” the watchman said,
“I thought you were a ghost.

“I never heard you come ashore;
And, look, your ship is gone. 30
Are all our fellows dead, my lord,
That you should come alone?”

O’Neill stood grinning in the porch
A little breathing space;
The redness blowing from the torch 35
Put colour in his face.

“I’ve left my ship behind,” he said,
“To join the Scotch King’s fleet.
I’ve left my men behind,” he said,
“To haul on her fore-sheet. 40

“I have come home all alone,” he said,
“In a country ship from sea.
Let my lady know the news,” he said,
“Then open here to me.”

Then lights were lit, and men gave hail 45
And welcomed him ashore;
The wife was glad within that jail
Between the Mull and the Gore.

O’Neill went swimming in the sea
And hunting up the glen; 50
No one could swim or ride as he
Of all the sons of men.

His wife went happy in the lane
And singing in the tower;
The sweet of having him again 55
Had ended all the sour.

But Kate, an old crone muttering dark
About that windy place,
Did not rejoice; she said: “I mark

O'Neill has fal'n from grace. 60

"He has been under the dark star
Since when he went away.
Men think that when they wander far
The black thing becomes grey.

"He has been dipped in the strange vat 65
And dyed with the strange dye;
And then the black thing — what is that
That dogs him, going by?

"A dog thing, black, goes padding past 70
Forever at his heel:
God help us all to peace at last!
I fear for the O'Neill.

"His teeth show when the Host does come
To comfort dying men;
And in the chapel he is dumb, 75
He never says Amen."

She would not speak with the O'Neill,
But when he crossed her path
She prayed, as tremblers do that feel
The devil in his wrath. 80

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And so the Time went by, whose hand
Upheaves the lives of men;
The cuckoo left his burning land
To toll along the glen.

So loud the thrushes sung that spring, 85
So rich the hawthorn was,
The air was like a living thing
Between the sky and the grass.

O'Neill's wife bore a little son,
And set him on her knee; 90

He grew apace to romp and run
And dabble in the sea.

But one thing strange about the child
The neighbours noted there:
That, even if the winds were mild, 95
His head was never bare.

His father made him wear a cap
At all times, night and day,
Bound round his forehead with a strap
To keep the cold away. 100

And up and down the little lad
Went singing at his game:
Men marvelled at the grace he had
To make the wild birds tame.

Men marvelled at the joy he took, 105
And at the things he said,
And at the beauty of his look,
This little Cap on Head.

And when the nights were dark between
The new moon and the old, 110
And fires were lit, and winds blew keen,
And old wives' tales were told,

This little son would scramble near
Beside his mother's place,
To listen to the tale and peer 115
With firelight on his face.

O'Neill would gather to the glow
With great eyes glittering fierce;
Old Kate would shake to see him so,
And cross herself from curse. 120

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It fell about hay-harvest time,

When the Lammas floods were out,
A ship all green with water-slime
Stood in and went about.

And anchored off the bight of sand, 125
And swam there like a seal,
With a banner of the bloody hand,
The flag of the O'Neill.

Then there was cheering in the court
And hurrying to the beach. 130
“A ship!” they cried, “a ship in port,
Brought up in Castle Reach.

“It is our ship. They are our men
There, coiling up the sheet;
It is our ship come home agen 135
From out the Scotch King’s fleet.

“And who ’s the noble in the boat
Comes rowing through the sea?
His colours are the O'Neill coat,
But what O'Neill is he?” 140

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O'Neill was in his turret tower,
With writings red and black;
Kate crossed herself to see him glower
That tide the ship came back[.]

He looked long at the anchored ship, 145
And at the coming boat;
The devil writhelled up his lip,
And snickered in his throat[.]

He strode the room and bit his nails,
He bit his flesh with rage, 150
As maddened felons do in jails,
And rats do in a cage.

He looked at Kate, who crossed her breast;
He heard them cheer below.
He said: "The wicked cannot rest, 155
And now I have to go."

They saw him hurry up the green
And on into the rain;
Beyond the brae he was not seen;
He was not seen again. 160

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O'Neill's wife went to watch the boat
Come driving to the sand;
The noble in the O'Neill coat
Stood up and waved his hand.

"That is O'Neill!" the clansmen cried, 165
"Or else his very twin."
"How came he to the ship?" they cried.
"Just now he was within."

"It is O'Neill," the lady said,
"And that 's his ship returned. 170
And a woman's life 's a school," she said,
"Where bitter things are learned."

O'Neill called to her through his tears:
"The bitter days are past.
I've prayed for this for seven years, 175
Now here I am at last."

Then, as the boat's bows cut the strand
Among the slipping foam,
He sprang to take his lady's hand;
He said: "I have come home." 180

His lady fainted like the dead,
Beside the slipping sea.
"This is O'Neill," the servants said,
"What is that other he?"

“Master,” they said, “where have you been
These seven years and more?” 185

“I’ve served the Scottish King and Queen
Along the Scottish shore.”

“Master,” they said, “another came,
So like in voice and face 190
To you, we thought it was the same,
And so he took your place.

“These seven years he ’s ruled us here,
While you were still at sea,
And that ’s his son that ’s coming here, 195
Look, Master, that is he.”

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O’Neill took off the wee boy’s cap
And ruffled through his hair;
He said: “A young tree full of sap,
A good shoot growing fair.” 200

He turned the hair for men to see,
And swallowed down his tears;
He said: “The gods be good to me,
The boy has devil’s ears!”

He took the young child by the heels 205
And broke him, head and breast:
The red hand ridded the O’Neills
That cuckoo in the nest.

O’Neill flung out the little limbs
To drift about the bay. 210
“Watch, fellows, if he sinks or swims,”
Was all they heard him say.

He said: “The wicked cannot rest,
And now I have to go.”
He set his ship’s head north and west 215

And stood into the flow.

The ship went shining like a seal,
And dimmed into the rain.
And no man saw the great O'Neill,
Nor heard of him again.

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