

5 In my native town of Salem, at the head of what, half a century ago, in the days of old King  
Derby, was a bustling wharf—but which is now burdened with decayed wooden  
warehouses, and exhibits few or no symptoms of commercial life; except, perhaps, a bark  
or brig, half-way down its melancholy length, discharging hides; or, nearer at hand, a Nova  
Scotia schooner, pitching out her cargo of firewood—at the head, I say, of this dilapidated  
10 wharf, which the tide often overflows, and along which, at the base and in the rear of the  
row of buildings, the track of many languid years is seen in a border of unthrifty grass—  
here, with a view from its front windows adown this not very enlivening prospect, and  
thence across the harbour, stands a spacious edifice of brick. From the loftiest point of its  
roof, during precisely three and a half hours of each forenoon, floats or droops, in breeze or  
calm, the banner of the republic; but with the thirteen stripes turned vertically, instead of  
15 horizontally, and thus indicating that a civil, and not a military, post of Uncle Sam's  
government is here established. Its front is ornamented with a portico of half-a-dozen  
wooden pillars, supporting a balcony, beneath which a flight of wide granite steps descends  
towards the street. Over the entrance hovers an enormous specimen of the American eagle,  
with outspread wings, a shield before her breast, and, if I recollect aright, a bunch of  
20 intermingled thunderbolts and barbed arrows in each claw. With the customary infirmity  
of temper that characterizes this unhappy fowl, she appears by the fierceness of her beak  
and eye, and the general truculency of her attitude, to threaten mischief to the inoffensive  
community; and especially to warn all citizens careful of their safety against intruding on  
the premises which she overshadows with her wings. Nevertheless, vixenly as she looks,  
25 many people are seeking at this very moment to shelter themselves under the wing of the  
federal eagle; imagining, I presume, that her bosom has all the softness and snugness of an  
eiderdown pillow. But she has no great tenderness even in her best of moods, and, sooner  
or later—oftener soon than late—is apt to fling off her nestlings with a scratch of her claw, a  
dab of her beak, or a rankling wound from her barbed arrows.

30 The pavement round about the above-described edifice—which we may as well name at  
once as the Custom-House of the port—has grass enough growing in its chinks to show that  
it has not, of late days, been worn by any multitudinous resort of business. In some months  
of the year, however, there often chances a forenoon when affairs move onward with a  
livelier tread. Such occasions might remind the elderly citizen of that period, before the last  
35 war with England, when Salem was a port by itself; not scorned, as she is now, by her own  
merchants and ship-owners, who permit her wharves to crumble to ruin while their  
ventures go to swell, needlessly and imperceptibly, the mighty flood of commerce at New  
York or Boston. On some such morning, when three or four vessels happen to have arrived  
at once usually from Africa or South America—or to be on the verge of their departure  
40 thitherward, there is a sound of frequent feet passing briskly up and down the granite  
steps. Here, before his own wife has greeted him, you may greet the sea-flushed ship-  
master, just in port, with his vessel's papers under his arm in a tarnished tin box. Here,  
too, comes his owner, cheerful, sombre, gracious or in the sulks, accordingly as his scheme  
of the now accomplished voyage has been realized in merchandise that will readily be  
45 turned to gold, or has buried him under a bulk of incommodities such as nobody will care  
to rid him of. Here, likewise—the germ of the wrinkle-browed, grizzly-bearded, careworn  
merchant—we have the smart young clerk, who gets the taste of traffic as a wolf-cub does  
of blood, and already sends adventures in his master's ships, when he had better be sailing  
mimic boats upon a mill-pond. Another figure in the scene is the outward-bound sailor, in  
50 quest of a protection; or the recently arrived one, pale and feeble, seeking a passport to the  
hospital. Nor must we forget the captains of the rusty little schooners that bring firewood  
from the British provinces; a rough-looking set of tarpaulins, without the alertness of the

Yankee aspect, but contributing an item of no slight importance to our decaying trade.

55 Cluster all these individuals together, as they sometimes were, with other miscellaneous  
ones to diversify the group, and, for the time being, it made the Custom-House a stirring  
scene. More frequently, however, on ascending the steps, you would discern— in the entry  
if it were summer time, or in their appropriate rooms if wintry or inclement weathers—a  
row of venerable figures, sitting in old-fashioned chairs, which were tipped on their hind  
60 legs back against the wall. Oftentimes they were asleep, but occasionally might be heard  
talking together, in voices between a speech and a snore, and with that lack of energy that  
distinguishes the occupants of alms-houses, and all other human beings who depend for  
subsistence on charity, on monopolized labour, or anything else but their own independent  
exertions. These old gentlemen—seated, like Matthew at the receipt of custom, but not very  
65 liable to be summoned thence, like him, for apostolic errands—were Custom-House  
officers.

Furthermore, on the left hand as you enter the front door, is a certain room or office, about  
fifteen feet square, and of a lofty height, with two of its arched windows commanding a  
view of the aforesaid dilapidated wharf, and the third looking across a narrow lane, and  
70 along a portion of Derby Street. All three give glimpses of the shops of grocers, block-  
makers, slop-sellers, and ship-chandlers, around the doors of which are generally to be  
seen, laughing and gossiping, clusters of old salts, and such other wharf-rats as haunt the  
Wapping of a seaport. The room itself is cobwebbed, and dingy with old paint; its floor is  
strewn with grey sand, in a fashion that has elsewhere fallen into long disuse; and it is easy  
to conclude, from the general slovenliness of the place, that this is a sanctuary into which  
75 womankind, with her tools of magic, the broom and mop, has very infrequent access. In  
the way of furniture, there is a stove with a voluminous funnel; an old pine desk with a  
three-legged stool beside it; two or three wooden-bottom chairs, exceedingly decrepit and  
infirm; and—not to forget the library—on some shelves, a score or two of volumes of the  
Acts of Congress, and a bulky Digest of the Revenue laws. A tin pipe ascends through the  
80 ceiling, and forms a medium of vocal communication with other parts of the edifice. And  
here, some six months ago—pacing from corner to corner, or lounging on the long-legged  
stool, with his elbow on the desk, and his eyes wandering up and down the columns of the  
morning newspaper—you might have recognised, honoured reader, the same individual  
85 who welcomed you into his cheery little study, where the sunshine glimmered so pleasantly  
through the willow branches on the western side of the Old Manse. But now, should you go  
thither to seek him, you would inquire in vain for the Locofoco Surveyor. The besom of  
reform hath swept him out of office, and a worthier successor wears his dignity and  
pockets his emoluments.

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