

Ghewahtok and Wanhulta

The Legend of Chiques Rock

From "Saga of the Susquehanna," by Chester Wittell

Where Susquehanna's tranquil tide
Quickens its current slow and wide,
And, narrowing, bends around the joint
Of that long finger, called the "Point;"
A precipice abrupt and sheer
In solemn grandeur rises. Here
The wanderer in awe may stand
To view a scene sublime and grand,
Letting his gaze in rapture fall
Upon the plain of Donegal,
Where smiling fields of wheat and corn
With verdant hue the land adorn;
Or, looking downward to the left,
See how the swirling rapids cleft
A bouldered passage, dark and deep,
Between the ridges high and steep.
Then, if of courage stout he be,
He may step to its edge to see
And scan the perpendicular
Of the dreadful and appalling scaur
Whose base to reach must plummet drop
Three hundred feet ere brought to stop:
So looms that cliff, named "Chiques Rock,"
Whose walls of stone the secret lock
In silence that forbears to tell
What here unwitnessed once befell.

In days of yore agone 'tis said
When by the lure of conquest led,
The white man came with ruthless hand
To pilfer and possess the land,
An Indian brave, Ghewahtok named,
Looked on the scene with eye inflamed
By such undying hate that he
Swore vengeance on the enemy,
And to that end, or soon or late,
Vowed he would lurk and lie in wait.

Now in the tribe there dwelt a maid,—
Dark, lithe, with raven hair abraid,—
Whom did Ghewahtok love; but she—
As lissom as a bird and free—
His love with such indifference met
As youth and coyness oft beget.

Try as he would, he could not gain
The secret veils that love sustain,
Nor win by wooing's tender art
The warm requital of her heart;
Though half in pity, half in pride,
Some slight regard did she divide,
Which, given parcel, heartened him
And made him vassal to her whim.
But maugre all the charms of love,
Such dole distrust could not remove,
Nor could her casual smile dispel
The doubt that made his life seem hell;
And oft as sank the evening sun,
When day its wonted course had run,
And 'round the campfire, stern and squat,
In converse grave the tribesmen sat,
His dark eyes glared with jealous flame
Upon her as he went and came.

Wanhulta (thus her name) to stray
Into the forest went one day,
And as she sat beside a brook,
In its clear mirror chanced to look,
When lo! she saw reflected there
The image of a youth most fair,
Whose golden hair and pallid face
Proclaimed him of the white man's race.
Silent he stood in deference meet
To her who tarried at his feet,
All signs forbearing (save to stare)
That had betrayed his presence there.
A while she sat in mute amaze
On his reflection there to gaze,
Ere, roused from reverie, did she start
With strange emotion in her heart—
A feeling like a current strong
That bore resolve its course along
And canceled by new rapture gained
What of Ghewahtok's love remained.
Whereat and instant she arose
As one its ecstasy who knows
And senses inwardly the source
Whence true love wends its wilful course.
Some words there were of timely ruse,
Such young and flustered lovers use,
Which, spoken, leave in after-stead
No memory of what was said—
A language terse, yet apt and bland,
Which only love may understand.

Albeit watchful eyes were set
Upon their love, the lovers met;
For whose the eye endued to trace
The feet of love from place to place?
And where the shaman who could guess
Its hiding in the wilderness?
Moons waxed and waned and still the twain
To do their hearts' sweet will were fain,
And often while her people slept
Thence from the fire Wanhulta crept
Her lover in the night to meet
And know his kisses berry-sweet.

Time flew on eagle wings; the days
Grew dim with autumn's amber haze,
As southward through the azure sky
The honking geese were seen to fly.
The paw-paw bulged with yellow mell,
And from the oak the acorn fell,
And the wild grape, ripening on the vine,
Told of the austral sun's decline.

One day Ghewahtok, hunting, came
Across the hills in search of game,
When at a streamlet's grassy brink
He saw a stranger stoop to drink.
He stole anigh, by caution led,
But paused ere "Itah"* could be said;
For the man was white and therefore he
Was deemed a mortal enemy.
He drew his knife; the other, too,
A longer and a sharper drew;
But strength prevailed; though he fought well,
At last the stranger gasped and fell.
Ghewahtok eyed him lying there
While the red blood hue'd his golden hair,
And thought: "My work so featly done,
The long-knives** shall be less by one."

Then straightway to Wanhulta's tent,
Vainglorious and bold he went.
"Behold! another knave is dead.
Here is his scalp." These words he said.

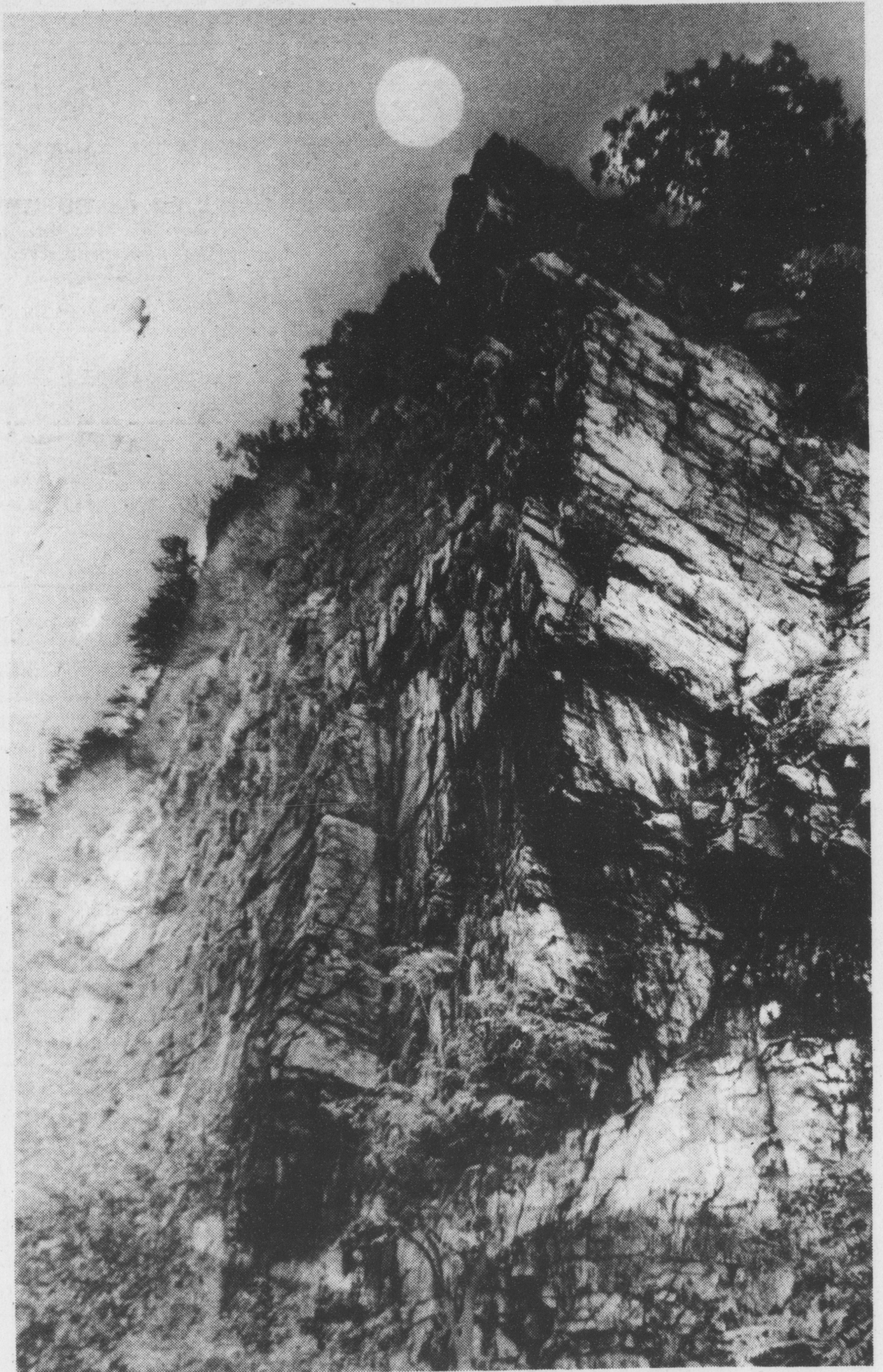
Wanhulta heard but did not speak;
A death-like pallor blanched her cheek;
For thus her heart the cold words found
And deeply dealt their dealy wound.
She gazed upon that golden hair,
With blood imbrued before her there,
And with one look of withering hate
Withdrew without the tent and sate.

Though keen the blade of mortal woe,
As they who feel its sharp edge know,
Yet keener grinds its edge the stone
Of misery that bides alone;
For whoso grief with friend may share
Has halved the burden of his care,
But doomed alone with grief to bide,
Doubled the same shall him betide.
And so Wanhulta: small relief
She found, with none to share her grief,
And shutting sorrow thus unnamed,
Her heart with woe became inflamed.
As one who by dire circumstance,
Dumb and astound, moves in a trance;
So in the toils of mortal anguish
Henceforth was she doomed to languish.

Winter passed; came spring again
With winds of March and April rain.
The maple buds began to swell;
The Wadwah*** raised its golden bell,
And in the river's crystal tide
The sparkling shad was seen to glide.
But in her heart, as in a vise,
Harsh winter with its snow and ice
Still held Wanhulta in a grip
That baffled plaint of tongue or lip;
Till, numb with woe and hopeless, care
Attained the zero of despair.

One summer eve (to seek relief
From the keen torture of her grief)
She walked abroad until she came
To that high cliff of tragic fame,

And stepping lightly to its edge
Sat down to ponder on a ledge.
Above her in the azure sky
She saw the white clouds scud and fly,
And wished that she, as they, might find
Peace in communion with the wind.



Chiques Rock

She looked below where, dark and deep,
The angry waters swirl and leap,
And thought how well her pain were done
If smothered in oblivion.
And as she sat and pondered there,
Suddenly she seemed aware
Of something dire and sinister
Whose evil power threatened her.
Instinctively she turned her head
And a frantic chill of fear and dread
Swept over her, for at her side—
A fiend of rage and wounded pride—
Ghewahtok stood. Within his eye
The rabid fire of jealousy
Yet burned, and when at last he spoke,
The pent-up tide of hatred broke
The dam of thought. "Love me or die!"
He roared....The far hills heard his cry
And answered it, but not so well
As she who said: "Love you? Not hell
Would pit a monster like to you.
'Twill naught avail to plead or sue,
For rather would I grasp the snake
Whose mottled coils a rattle shake
Than favor you. Henceforth alone
I'll bide. Ugh! murderer; begone!"

As winds blown upward from the mouth

Of torrid regions of the south
In funneled shapes loud-thundering, roar
Across the prairie's level floor,
Blackening the sky that shinks aghast,
As if it heard the judgement blast;
So on his face his cholor grew,
A presage terrible to view;
As with a frightful oath that rang
From shore to shore, Ghewahtok sprang
Toward Wanhulta. "Cozener!"
He shouted hoarsely, seizing her:
"Though twain while living, you and I
Thus linked as one at least can die."
So saying, he clasped her to his breast
And on her lips one last kiss pressed
And leaped....As from the zenith's height
The falcon swoops in downward flight,
So, locked in close embrace, they fell
Down...down...down in death to dwell.
And thenceforth to this very day
Adepts far-seen in legend say
A certain pine tree on a ledge,
That juts out from the cliff's high edge,
Some remnant of that tragedy
Still keeps preserved in memory;
For often when the wet wind blows
Its psalter strangely vocal grows
And whispers forth from every rame
Ghewahtok's and Wanhulta's name.

* The common greeting, or "How-do-you-do?" of the Indians.

** The white men were called "long knives" by the Indians.

*** The Indian name of an unidentified flower—possibly the dandelion or the butter-cup.