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The Scarlet Letter

Nathaniel Hawthorne



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The hero, once again in a new territory,
 seems to find a new, or he has done some-
 thing in his past life, which he fears will
 be of very bad influence on his new
 kind. I therefore the hero is again to
 make up his mind by the book, all at
 last himself to the feeling to return
 he did the wrong, trying to influence
 other persons to do it, but finds that
 the world is unchangeable, but he
 will pull up a great deal more, and
 with it. This is a very definite
 thing. The is a plot, simple and
 solemn, and has an interest in old.
 gaining a new part of the - a doubt-
 ful thing which after has been the
 approach, the limit of his life. He
 has this unchangeable ground of his
 own in various ways: he can't
 will it, if he does, for in reality
 more than; but this is at least his
 will to do, so he determines to
 will back to him and get the way
 in some other way. Yes, the debt
 him to a poor woman, troubled by his
 to, might have been married by his
 father, and have been by entering up
 to do present amount. The woman
 has perhaps an interest in the hero,
 and the change of her. So they live
 in a way of a very natural and simple

The Scarlet Letter

Manuscript by Hawthorne containing the plot outline for an unpublished story

Preface to the Second Edition

MUCH TO THE AUTHOR'S SURPRISE, and – if he may say so without additional offence – considerably to his amusement, he finds that his sketch of official life, introductory to *The Scarlet Letter*, has created an unprecedented excitement in the respectable community immediately around him. It could hardly have been more violent, indeed, had he burned down the Custom House, and quenched its last smoking ember in the blood of a certain venerable personage, against whom he is supposed to cherish a peculiar malevolence. As the public disapprobation would weigh very heavily on him, were he conscious of deserving it, the author begs leave to say that he has carefully read over the introductory pages with a purpose to alter or expunge whatever might be found amiss, and to make the best reparation in his power for the atrocities of which he has been adjudged guilty. But it appears to him that the only remarkable features of the sketch are its frank and genuine good humour, and the general accuracy with which he has conveyed his sincere impressions of the characters therein described. As to enmity, or ill feeling of any kind, personal or political, he utterly disclaims such motives. The sketch might perhaps have been wholly omitted, without loss to the public, or detriment to the book; but, having undertaken to write it, he conceives that it could not have been done in a better or a kindlier spirit, nor, so far as his abilities availed, with a livelier effect of truth.

The author is constrained, therefore, to republish his introductory sketch without the change of a word.

Salem, 30th March, 1850

*The Custom House*Introductory to *The Scarlet Letter*

IT IS A LITTLE REMARKABLE that – though disinclined to talk overmuch of myself and my affairs at the fireside, and to my personal friends – an autobiographical impulse should, twice in my life, have taken possession of me in addressing the public. The first time was three or four years since, when I favoured the reader – inexcusably, and for no earthly reason that either the indulgent reader or the intrusive author could imagine – with a description of my way of life in the deep quietude of an old manse. And now – because, beyond my deserts, I was happy enough to find a listener or two on the former occasion – I again seize the public by the button, and talk of my three years' experience in a custom house. The example of the famous "P.P., Clerk of this Parish",* was never more faithfully followed. The truth seems to be, however, that when he casts his leaves forth upon the wind, the author addresses, not the many who will fling aside his volume, or never take it up, but the few who will understand him better than most of his schoolmates and life mates. Some authors indeed do far more than this, and indulge themselves in such confidential depths of revelation as could fittingly be addressed only and exclusively to the one heart and mind of perfect sympathy; as if the printed book, thrown at large on the wide world, were certain to find out the divided segment of the writer's own nature, and complete his circle of existence by bringing him into communion with it. It is scarcely decorous, however, to speak all, even where we speak impersonally. But – as thoughts are frozen and utterance benumbed, unless the speaker stand in some true relation with his audience – it may be pardonable to imagine that a friend, a kind and apprehensive, though not the closest friend, is listening to our talk; and then, a native reserve being thawed by this genial consciousness, we may prate of the circumstances that lie around us, and even of ourself, but still keep the inmost "me" behind its veil. To this extent and within these limits, an author, methinks, may be autobiographical, without violating either the reader's rights or his own.

It will be seen, likewise, that this custom-house sketch has a certain propriety, of a kind always recognized in literature, as explaining how a large portion of the following pages came into my possession, and as offering proofs of the authenticity of a narrative therein contained. This, in fact – a desire to put myself in my true position as editor, or very little more, of the most prolix among the tales that make up my volume – this, and no other, is my true reason for assuming a personal relation with the public. In accomplishing the main purpose, it has appeared allowable, by a few extra touches, to give a faint representation of a mode of life not heretofore described, together with some of the characters that move in it, among whom the author happened to make one.

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 halfway 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 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 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 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, 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.

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 onwards with a livelier tread. Such occasions might remind the elderly citizen of that period, before the last 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 thitherwards, 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 shipmaster, 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 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 millpond. Another figure in the scene is the outward-bound sailor, in 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.

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 summertime, 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 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 almshouses, 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 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 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 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 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 recognized, honoured Reader, the same

individual 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 enquire in vain for the locofoco surveyor.* The besom of reform has swept him out of office; and a worthier successor wears his dignity and pockets his emoluments.

This old town of Salem – my native place, though I have dwelt much away from it, both in boyhood and maturer years – possesses, or did possess, a hold on my affection, the force of which I have never realized during my seasons of actual residence here. Indeed, so far as its physical aspect is concerned, with its flat, unvaried surface, covered chiefly with wooden houses, few or none of which pretend to architectural beauty – its irregularity, which is neither picturesque nor quaint, but only tame – its long and lazy street, lounging wearisomely through the whole extent of the peninsula, with Gallows Hill and New Guinea at one end, and a view of the almshouse at the other – such being the features of my native town, it would be quite as reasonable to form a sentimental attachment to a disarranged chequerboard. And yet, though invariably happiest elsewhere, there is within me a feeling for Old Salem which, in lack of a better phrase, I must be content to call affection. The sentiment is probably assignable to the deep and aged roots which my family has stuck into the soil. It is now nearly two centuries and a quarter since the original Briton, the earliest emigrant of my name, made his appearance in the wild and forest-bordered settlement which has since become a city. And here his descendants have been born and died, and have mingled their earthy substance with the soil; until no small portion of it must necessarily be akin to the mortal frame wherewith, for a little while, I walk the streets. In part, therefore, the attachment which I speak of is the mere sensuous sympathy of dust for dust. Few of my countrymen can know what it is; nor, as frequent transplantation is perhaps better for the stock, need they consider it desirable to know.

But the sentiment has likewise its moral quality. The figure of that first ancestor, invested by family tradition with a dim and dusky grandeur, was present to my boyish imagination as far back as I can remember. It still haunts me, and induces a sort of home-feeling with the past, which I scarcely claim in reference to the present phase of the town. I seem to have a stronger claim to a residence here on account of this

grave, bearded, sable-cloaked and steeple-crowned progenitor – who came so early, with his Bible and his sword, and trode the unworn street with such a stately port, and made so large a figure as a man of war and peace – a stronger claim than for myself, whose name is seldom heard and my face hardly known. He was a soldier, legislator, judge; he was a ruler in the Church; he had all the Puritanic traits, both good and evil. He was likewise a bitter persecutor; as witness the Quakers, who have remembered him in their histories, and relate an incident of his hard severity towards a woman of their sect, which will last longer, it is to be feared, than any record of his better deeds, although these were many. His son, too, inherited the persecuting spirit, and made himself so conspicuous in the martyrdom of the witches, that their blood may fairly be said to have left a stain upon him. So deep a stain, indeed, that his old dry bones in the Charter Street burial ground must still retain it, if they have not crumbled utterly to dust! I know not whether these ancestors of mine bethought themselves to repent, and ask pardon of Heaven for their cruelties; or whether they are now groaning under the heavy consequences of them, in another state of being. At all events, I, the present writer, as their representative, hereby take shame upon myself for their sakes, and pray that any curse incurred by them – as I have heard, and as the dreary and unprosperous condition of the race, for many a long year back, would argue to exist – may be now and henceforth removed.

Doubtless, however, either of these stern and black-browed Puritans would have thought it quite a sufficient retribution for his sins, that after so long a lapse of years, the old trunk of the family tree, with so much venerable moss upon it, should have borne as its topmost bough an idler like myself. No aim that I have ever cherished would they recognize as laudable; no success of mine – if my life, beyond its domestic scope, had ever been brightened by success – would they deem otherwise than worthless, if not positively disgraceful. “What is he?” murmurs one grey shadow of my forefathers to the other. “A writer of story books! What kind of business in life – what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind in his day and generation – may that be? Why, the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler!” Such are the compliments bandied between my great grandsires and myself, across the gulf of time! And yet, let them scorn me as they will, strong traits of their nature have intertwined themselves with mine.

Planted deep in the town’s earliest infancy and childhood by these two earnest and energetic men, the race has ever since subsisted here; always, too, in respectability; never, so far as I have known, disgraced by a single unworthy member; but seldom or never, on the other hand, after the first two generations, performing any memorable deed, or so much as putting forward a claim to public notice. Gradually they have sunk almost out of sight; as old houses, here and there about the streets, get covered halfway to the eaves by the accumulation of new soil. From father to son, for above a hundred years, they followed the sea; a grey-headed shipmaster in each generation retiring from the quarterdeck to the homestead, while a boy of fourteen took the hereditary place before the mast, confronting the salt spray and the gale which had blustered against his sire and grandsire. The boy also, in due time, passed from the forecabin to the cabin, spent a tempestuous manhood, and returned from his world-wanderings to grow old and die, and mingle his dust with the natal earth. This long connection of a family with one spot as its place of birth and burial, creates a kindred between the human being and the locality, quite independent of any charm in the scenery or moral circumstances that surround him. It is not love, but instinct. The new inhabitant – who came himself from a foreign land, or whose father or grandfather came – has little claim to be called a Salemite; he has no conception of the oyster-like tenacity with which an old settler, over whom his third century is creeping, clings to the spot where his successive generations have been embedded. It is no matter that the place is joyless for him; that he is weary of the old wooden houses, the mud and dust, the dead level of site and sentiment, the chill east wind, and the chilliest of social atmospheres – all these, and whatever faults besides he may see or imagine, are nothing to the purpose. The spell survives, and just as powerfully as if the natal spot were an earthly paradise. So has it been in my case. I felt it almost as a destiny to make Salem my home; so that the mould of features and cast of character which had all along been familiar here – ever, as one representative of the race lay down in the grave, another assuming, as it were, his sentry-march along the Main Street – might still in my little day be seen and recognized in the old town. Nevertheless, this very sentiment is an evidence that the connection, which has become an unhealthy one, should at last be severed. Human nature will not flourish any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted for too long a series of

generations in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth.

On emerging from the old manse, it was chiefly this strange, indolent, unjoyous attachment for my native town that brought me to fill a place in Uncle Sam's brick edifice, when I might as well, or better, have gone somewhere else. My doom was on me. It was not the first time, nor the second, that I had gone away – as it seemed, permanently – but yet returned, like the bad halfpenny; or as if Salem were for me the inevitable centre of the universe. So one fine morning, I ascended the flight of granite steps, with the President's commission in my pocket, and was introduced to the corps of gentlemen who were to aid me in my weighty responsibility as chief executive officer of the custom house.

I doubt greatly – or rather I do not doubt at all – whether any public functionary of the United States, either in the civil or military line, has ever had such a patriarchal body of veterans under his orders as myself. The whereabouts of the oldest inhabitant was at once settled when I looked at them. For upwards of twenty years before this epoch, the independent position of the collector had kept the Salem custom house out of the whirlpool of political vicissitude, which makes the tenure of office generally so fragile. A soldier – New England's most distinguished soldier – he stood firmly on the pedestal of his gallant services; and, himself secure in the wise liberality of the successive administrations through which he had held office, he had been the safety of his subordinates in many an hour of danger and heart-quake. General Miller* was radically conservative; a man over whose kindly nature habit had no slight influence; attaching himself strongly to familiar faces, and with difficulty moved to change, even when change might have brought unquestionable improvement. Thus, on taking charge of my department, I found few but aged men. They were ancient sea captains for the most part, who, after being tossed on every sea, and standing up sturdily against life's tempestuous blast, had finally drifted into this quiet nook; where, with little to disturb them, except the periodical terrors of a presidential election, they one and all acquired a new lease of existence. Though by no means less liable than their fellow men to age and infirmity, they had evidently some talisman or other that kept death at bay. Two or three of their number,

as I was assured, being gouty and rheumatic, or perhaps bedridden, never dreamt of making their appearance at the custom house during a large part of the year; but, after a torpid winter, would creep out into the warm sunshine of May or June, go lazily about what they termed duty, and, at their own leisure and convenience, betake themselves to bed again. I must plead guilty to the charge of abbreviating the official breath of more than one of these venerable servants of the republic. They were allowed, on my representation, to rest from their arduous labours, and soon afterwards – as if their sole principle of life had been zeal for their country's service – as I verily believe it was – withdrew to a better world. It is a pious consolation to me, that, through my interference, a sufficient space was allowed them for repentance of the evil and corrupt practices into which, as a matter of course, every custom-house officer must be supposed to fall. Neither the front nor the back entrance of the custom house opens on the road to Paradise.

The greater part of my officers were Whigs. It was well for their venerable brotherhood that the new surveyor was not a politician, and though a faithful democrat in principle, neither received nor held his office with any reference to political services. Had it been otherwise – had an active politician been put into this influential post, to assume the easy task of making head against a Whig collector, whose infirmities withheld him from the personal administration of his office – hardly a man of the old corps would have drawn the breath of official life within a month after the exterminating angel had come up the custom-house steps. According to the received code in such matters, it would have been nothing short of duty, in a politician, to bring every one of those white heads under the axe of the guillotine. It was plain enough to discern, that the old fellows dreaded some such discourtesy at my hands. It pained, and at the same time amused me, to behold the terrors that attended my advent; to see a furrowed cheek, weather-beaten by half a century of storm, turn ashy pale at the glance of so harmless an individual as myself; to detect, as one or another addressed me, the tremor of a voice which, in long-past days, had been wont to bellow through a speaking trumpet hoarsely enough to frighten Boreas* himself to silence. They knew, these excellent old persons, that by all established rule – and, as regarded some of them, weighed by their own lack of efficiency for business – they ought to have given place to younger men, more orthodox in politics, and altogether fitter than themselves