

HAWTHORNE
NATHANIEL

BIOGRAPHICAL
SKETCHES

Nathaniel Hawthorne

Biographical Sketches

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Biographical Sketches / (From: «Fanshawe and Other Pieces»):*

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MRS. HUTCHINSON

The character of this female suggests a train of thought which will form as natural an Introduction to her story, as most of the Prefaces to Gay's Fables, or the tales of Prior; besides that, the general soundness of the moral may excuse any want of present applicability. We will not look for a living resemblance of Mrs. Hutchinson, though the search might not be altogether fruitless. But there are portentous indications, changes gradually taking place in the habits and feelings of the gentle sex, which seem to threaten our posterity with many of those public women, whereof one was a burden too grievous for our fathers. The press, however, is now the medium through which feminine ambition chiefly manifests itself; and we will not anticipate the period (trusting to be gone hence ere it arrive) when fair orators shall be as numerous as the fair authors of our own day. The hastiest glance may show how much of the texture and body of

cisatlantic literature is the work of those slender fingers from which only a light and fanciful embroidery has heretofore been required, that might sparkle upon the garment without enfeebling the web. Woman's intellect should never give the tone to that of man; and even her morality is not exactly the material for masculine virtue. A false liberality, which mistakes the strong division-lines of Nature for arbitrary distinctions, and a courtesy, which might polish criticism, but should never soften it, have done their best to add a girlish feebleness to the tottering infancy of our literature. The evil is likely to be a growing one. As yet, the great body of American women are a domestic race; but when a continuance of ill-judged incitements shall have turned their hearts away from the fireside, there are obvious circumstances which will render female pens more numerous and more prolific than those of men, though but equally encouraged; and (limited, of course, by the scanty support of the public, but increasing indefinitely within those limits) the ink-stained Amazons will expel their rivals by actual pressure, and petticoats wave triumphantly over all the field. But, allowing that such forebodings are slightly exaggerated, is it good for woman's self that the path of feverish hope, of tremulous success, of bitter and ignominious disappointment, should be left wide open to her? Is the prize worth her having, if she win it? Fame does not increase the peculiar respect which men pay to female excellence, and there is a delicacy (even in rude bosoms, where few would think to find it) that perceives, or fancies, a sort of impropriety in

the display of woman's natal mind to the gaze of the world, with indications by which its inmost secrets may be searched out. In fine, criticism should examine with a stricter, instead of a more indulgent eye, the merits of females at its bar, because they are to justify themselves for an irregularity which men do not commit in appearing there; and woman, when she feels the impulse of genius like a command of Heaven within her, should be aware that she is relinquishing a part of the loveliness of her sex, and obey the inward voice with sorrowing reluctance, like the Arabian maid who bewailed the gift of prophecy. Hinting thus imperfectly at sentiments which may be developed on a future occasion, we proceed to consider the celebrated subject of this sketch.

Mrs. Hutchinson was a woman of extraordinary talent and strong imagination, whom the latter quality, following the general direction taken by the enthusiasm of the times, prompted to stand forth as a reformer in religion. In her native country, she had shown symptoms of irregular and daring thought, but, chiefly by the influence of a favorite pastor, was restrained from open indiscretion. On the removal of this clergyman, becoming dissatisfied with the ministry under which she lived, she was drawn in by the great tide of Puritan emigration, and visited Massachusetts within a few years after its first settlement. But she bore trouble in her own bosom, and could find no peace in this chosen land. She soon began to promulgate strange and dangerous opinions, tending, in the peculiar situation of

the colony, and from the principles which were its basis, and indispensable for its temporary support, to eat into its very existence. We shall endeavor to give a more practical idea of this part of her course.

It is a summer evening. The dusk has settled heavily upon the woods, the waves, and the Trimountain peninsula, increasing that dismal aspect of the embryo town, which was said to have drawn tears of despondency from Mrs. Hutchinson, though she believed that her mission thither was divine. The houses, straw thatched and lowly roofed, stand irregularly along streets that are yet roughened by the roots of the trees, as if the forest, departing at the approach of man, had left its reluctant footprints behind. Most of the dwellings are lonely and silent: from a few we may hear the reading of some sacred text, or the quiet voice of prayer; but nearly all the sombre life of the scene is collected near the extremity of the village. A crowd of hooded women, and of men in steeple-hats and close-cropped hair, are assembled at the door and open windows of a house newly built. An earnest expression glows in every face; and some press inward, as if the bread of life were to be dealt forth, and they feared to lose their share; while others would fain hold them back, but enter with them, since they may not be restrained. We, also, will go in, edging through the thronged doorway to an apartment which occupies the whole breadth of the house. At the upper end, behind a table, on which are placed the Scriptures and two glimmering lamps, we see a woman, plainly attired, as befits her ripened years: her

hair, complexion, and eyes are dark, the latter somewhat dull and heavy, but kindling up with a gradual brightness. Let us look round upon the hearers. At her right hand his countenance suiting well with the gloomy light which discovers it, stands Vane, the youthful governor, preferred by a hasty judgment of the people over all the wise and hoary heads that had preceded him to New England. In his mysterious eyes we may read a dark enthusiasm, akin to that of the woman whose cause he has espoused, combined with a shrewd worldly foresight, which tells him that her doctrines will be productive of change and tumult, the elements of his power and delight. On her left, yet slightly drawn back, so as to evince a less decided support, is Cotton, no young and hot enthusiast, but a mild, grave man in the decline of life, deep in all the learning of the age, and sanctified in heart, and made venerable in feature, by the long exercise of his holy profession. He, also, is deceived by the strange fire now laid upon the altar; and he alone among his brethren is excepted in the denunciation of the new apostle, as sealed and set apart by Heaven to the work of the ministry. Others of the priesthood stand full in front of the woman, striving to beat her down with brows of wrinkled iron, and whispering sternly and significantly among themselves as she unfolds her seditious doctrines, and grows warm in their support. Foremost is Hugh Peters, full of holy wrath, and scarce containing himself from rushing forward to convict her of damnable heresies. There, also, is Ward, meditating a reply of empty puns, and quaint antitheses,

and tinkling jests that puzzle us with nothing but a sound. The audience are variously affected; but none are indifferent. On the foreheads of the aged, the mature, and strong-minded, you may generally read steadfast disapprobation, though here and there is one whose faith seems shaken in those whom he had trusted for years. The females, on the other hand, are shuddering and weeping, and at times they cast a desolate look of fear around them; while the young men lean forward, fiery and impatient, fit instruments for whatever rash deed may be suggested. And what is the eloquence that gives rise to all these passions? The woman tells then (and cites texts from the Holy Book to prove her words) that they have put their trust in unregenerated and uncommissioned men, and have followed them into the wilderness for nought. Therefore their hearts are turning from those whom they had chosen to lead them to heaven; and they feel like children who have been enticed far from home, and see the features of their guides change all at once, assuming a fiendish shape in some frightful solitude.

These proceedings of Mrs. Hutchinson could not long be endured by the provincial government. The present was a most remarkable case, in which religious freedom was wholly inconsistent with public safety, and where the principles of an illiberal age indicated the very course which must have been pursued by worldly policy and enlightened wisdom. Unity of faith was the star that had guided these people over the deep; and a diversity of sects would either have scattered them from the land

to which they had as yet so few attachments, or, perhaps, have excited a diminutive civil war among those who had come so far to worship together. The opposition to what may be termed the Established Church had now lost its chief support by the removal of Vane from office, and his departure for England, and Mr. Cotton began to have that light in regard to his errors, which will sometimes break in upon the wisest and most pious men, when their opinions are unhappily discordant with those of the powers that be. A synod, the first in New England, was speedily assembled, and pronounced its condemnation of the obnoxious doctrines. Mrs. Hutchinson was next summoned before the supreme civil tribunal, at which, however, the most eminent of the clergy were present, and appear to have taken a very active part as witnesses and advisers. We shall here resume the more picturesque style of narration.

It is a place of humble aspect where the elders of the people are met, sitting in judgment upon the disturber of Israel. The floor of the low and narrow hall is laid with planks hewn by the axe; the beams of the roof still wear the rugged bark with which they grew up in the forest; and the hearth is formed of one broad, unhammered stone, heaped with logs that roll their blaze and smoke up a chimney of wood and clay. A sleety shower beats fitfully against the windows, driven by the November blast, which comes howling onward from the northern desert, the boisterous and unwelcome herald of a New England winter. Rude benches are arranged across the apartment, and along its

sides, occupied by men whose piety and learning might have entitled them to seats in those high councils of the ancient church, whence opinions were sent forth to confirm or supersede the gospel in the belief of the whole world and of posterity. Here are collected all those blessed fathers of the land, who rank in our veneration next to the evangelists of Holy Writ; and here, also, are many, unpurified from the fiercest errors of the age, and ready to propagate the religion of peace by violence. In the highest place sits Winthrop, – a man by whom the innocent and guilty might alike desire to be judged; the first confiding in his integrity and wisdom, the latter hoping in his mildness, Next is Endicott, who would stand with his drawn sword at the gate of heaven, and resist to the death all pilgrims thither, except they travelled his own path. The infant eyes of one in this assembly beheld the fagots blazing round the martyrs in Bloody Mary's time: in later life he dwelt long at Leyden, with the first who went from England for conscience' sake; and now, in his weary age, it matters little where he lies down to die. There are others whose hearts were smitten in the high meridian of ambitious hope, and whose dreams still tempt them with the pomp of the Old World and the din of its crowded cities, gleaming and echoing over the deep. In the midst, and in the centre of all eyes, we see the woman. She stands loftily before her judges with a determined brow; and, unknown to herself, there is a flash of carnal pride half hidden in her eye, as she surveys the many learned and famous men whom her doctrines have put in fear. They question

her; and her answers are ready and acute: she reasons with them shrewdly, and brings Scripture in support of every argument. The deepest controversialists of that scholastic day find here a woman, whom all their trained and sharpened intellects are inadequate to foil. But, by the excitement of the contest, her heart is made to rise and swell within her, and she bursts forth into eloquence. She tells them of the long unquietness which she had endured in England, perceiving the corruption of the Church, and yearning for a purer and more perfect light, and how, in a day of solitary prayer, that light was given. She claims for herself the peculiar power of distinguishing between the chosen of man, and the sealed of Heaven, and affirms that her gifted eye can see the glory round the foreheads of saints, sojourning in their mortal state. She declares herself commissioned to separate the true shepherds from the false, and denounces present and future judgments on the laud, if she be disturbed in her celestial errand. Thus the accusations are proved from her own mouth. Her judges hesitate; and some speak faintly in her defence; but, with a few dissenting voices, sentence is pronounced, bidding her go out from among them, and trouble the land no more.

Mrs. Hutchinson's adherents throughout the colony were now disarmed; and she proceeded to Rhode Island, an accustomed refuge for the exiles of Massachusetts in all seasons of persecution. Her enemies believed that the anger of Heaven was following her, of which Governor Winthrop does not disdain to record a notable instance, very interesting in a scientific point

of view, but fitter for his old and homely narrative than for modern repetition. In a little time, also, she lost her husband, who is mentioned in history only as attending her footsteps, and whom we may conclude to have been (like most husbands of celebrated women) a mere insignificant appendage of his mightier wife. She now grew uneasy away from the Rhode Island colonists, whose liberality towards her, at an era when liberality was not esteemed a Christian virtue, probably arose from a comparative insouciance on religious matters, more distasteful to Mrs. Hutchinson than even the uncompromising narrowness of the Puritans. Her final movement was to lead her family within the limits of the Dutch jurisdiction, where, having felled the trees of a virgin soil, she became herself the virtual head, civil and ecclesiastical, of a little colony.

Perhaps here she found the repose hitherto so vainly sought. Secluded from all whose faith she could not govern, surrounded by the dependants over whom she held an unlimited influence, agitated by none of the tumultuous billows which were left swelling behind her, we may suppose that, in the stillness of Nature, her heart was stilled. But her impressive story was to have an awful close. Her last scene is as difficult to be described as a shipwreck, where the shrieks of the victims die unheard, along a desolate sea, and a shapeless mass of agony is all that can be brought home to the imagination. The savage foe was on the watch for blood. Sixteen persons assembled at the evening prayer: in the deep midnight their cry rang through the forest;

and daylight dawned upon the lifeless clay of all but one. It was a circumstance not to be unnoticed by our stern ancestors, in considering the fate of her who had so troubled their religion, that an infant daughter, the sole survivor amid the terrible destruction of her mother's household, was bred in a barbarous faith, and never learned the way to the Christian's heaven. Yet we will hope that there the mother and child have met.

SIR WILLIAM PHIPS

Few of the personages of past times (except such as have gained renown in fireside legends as well as in written history) are anything more than mere names to their successors. They seldom stand up in our imaginations like men. The knowledge communicated by the historian and biographer is analogous to that which we acquire of a country by the map, – minute, perhaps, and accurate, and available for all necessary purposes, but cold and naked, and wholly destitute of the mimic charm produced by landscape-painting. These defects are partly remediable, and even without an absolute violation of literal truth, although by methods rightfully interdicted to professors of biographical exactness. A license must be assumed in brightening the materials which time has rusted, and in tracing out half-obliterated inscriptions on the columns of antiquity: Fancy must throw her reviving light on the faded incidents that indicate character, whence a ray will be reflected, more or less vividly, on the person to be described. The portrait of the ancient governor whose name stands at the head of this article will owe any interest it may possess, not to his internal self, but to certain peculiarities of his fortune. These must be briefly noticed.

The birth and early life of Sir William Phips were rather an extraordinary prelude to his subsequent distinction. He was one of the twenty-six children of a gunsmith, who exercised his trade

– where hunting and war must have given it a full encouragement
– in a small frontier settlement near the mouth of the river Kennebec. Within the boundaries of the Puritan provinces, and wherever those governments extended an effectual sway, no depth nor solitude of the wilderness could exclude youth from all the common opportunities of moral, and far more than common ones of religious education. Each settlement of the Pilgrims was a little piece of the Old World inserted into the New. It was like Gideon's fleece, unwet with dew: the desert wind that breathed over it left none of its wild influences there. But the first settlers of Maine and New Hampshire were led thither entirely by carnal motives: their governments were feeble, uncertain, sometimes nominally annexed to their sister colonies, and sometimes asserting a troubled independence. Their rulers might be deemed, in more than one instance, lawless adventurers, who found that security in the forest which they had forfeited in Europe. Their clergy (unlike that revered band who acquired so singular a fame elsewhere in New England) were too often destitute of the religious fervor which should have kept them in the track of virtue, unaided by the restraints of human law and the dread of worldly dishonor; and there are records of lamentable lapses on the part of those holy men, which, if we may argue the disorder of the sheep from the unfitness of the shepherd, tell a sad tale as to the morality of the eastern provinces. In this state of society, the future governor grew up; and many years after, sailing with a fleet and an army to

make war upon the French, he pointed out the very hills where he had reached the age of manhood, unskilled even to read and write. The contrast between the commencement and close of his life was the effect of casual circumstances. During a considerable time, he was a mariner, at a period when there was much license on the high-seas. After attaining to some rank in the English navy, he heard of an ancient Spanish wreck off the coast of Hispaniola, of such mighty value, that, according to the stories of the day, the sunken gold might be seen to glisten, and the diamonds to flash, as the triumphant billows tossed about their spoil. These treasures of the deep (by the aid of certain noblemen, who claimed the lion's share) Sir William Phips sought for, and recovered, and was sufficiently enriched, even after an honest settlement with the partners of his adventure. That the land might give him honor, as the sea had given him wealth, he received knighthood from King James. Returning to New England, he professed repentance of his sins (of which, from the nature both of his early and more recent life, there could scarce fail to be some slight accumulation), was baptized, and, on the accession of the Prince of Orange to the throne, became the first governor under the second charter. And now, having arranged these preliminaries, we shall attempt to picture forth a day of Sir William's life, introducing no very remarkable events, because history supplies us with none such convertible to our purpose.

It is the forenoon of a day in summer, shortly after the

governor's arrival; and he stands upon his doorsteps, preparatory to a walk through the metropolis. Sir William is a stout man, an inch or two below the middle size, and rather beyond the middle point of life. His dress is of velvet, – a dark purple, broadly embroidered; and his sword-hilt and the lion's head of his cane display specimens of the gold from the Spanish wreck. On his head, in the fashion of the court of Louis XIV., is a superb full-bottomed periwig, amid whose heap of ringlets his face shows like a rough pebble in the setting that befits a diamond. Just emerging from the door are two footmen, – one an African slave of shining ebony, the other an English bond-servant, the property of the governor for a term of years. As Sir William comes down the steps, he is met by three elderly gentlemen in black, grave and solemn as three tombstones on a ramble from the burying-ground. These are ministers of the town, among whom we recognize Dr. Increase Mather, the late provincial agent at the English court, the author of the present governor's appointment, and the right arm of his administration. Here follow many bows and a deal of angular politeness on both sides. Sir William professes his anxiety to re-enter the house, and give audience to the reverend gentlemen: they, on the other hand, cannot think of interrupting his walk; and the courteous dispute is concluded by a junction of the parties; Sir William and Dr. Mather setting forth side by side, the two other clergymen forming the centre of the column, and the black and white footmen bringing up the rear. The business in hand relates to the dealings of Satan

in the town of Salem. Upon this subject, the principal ministers of the province have been consulted; and these three eminent persons are their deputies, commissioned to express a doubtful opinion, implying, upon the whole, an exhortation to speedy and vigorous measures against the accused. To such councils, Sir William, bred in the forest and on the ocean, and tintured with the superstition of both, is well inclined to listen.

As the dignitaries of Church and State make their way beneath the overhanging houses, the lattices are thrust ajar, and you may discern, just in the boundaries of light and shade, the prim faces of the little Puritan damsels, eying the magnificent governor, and envious of the bolder curiosity of the men. Another object of almost equal interest now appears in the middle of the way. It is a man clad in a hunting-shirt and Indian stockings, and armed with a long gun. His feet have been wet with the waters of many an inland lake and stream; and the leaves and twigs of the tangled wilderness are intertwined with his garments: on his head he wears a trophy which we would not venture to record without good evidence of the fact, – a wig made of the long and straight black hair of his slain savage enemies. This grim old heathen stands bewildered in the midst of King Street. The governor regards him attentively, and, recognizing a playmate of his youth, accosts him with a gracious smile, inquires as to the prosperity of their birthplace, and the life or death of their ancient neighbors, and makes appropriate remarks on the different stations allotted by fortune to two individuals born and

bred beside the same wild river. Finally he puts into his hand, at parting, a shilling of the Massachusetts coinage, stamped with the figure of a stubbed pine-tree, mistaken by King Charles for the oak which saved his royal life. Then all the people praise the humility and bountifulness of the good governor, who struts onward flourishing his gold-headed cane; while the gentleman in the straight black wig is left with a pretty accurate idea of the distance between himself and his old companion. Meantime, Sir William steers his course towards the town dock. A gallant figure is seen approaching on the opposite side of the street, in a naval uniform profusely laced, and with a cutlass swinging by his side. This is Captain Short, the commander of a frigate in the service of the English king, now lying in the harbor. Sir William bristles up at sight of him, and crosses the street with a lowering front, unmindful of the hints of Dr. Mather, who is aware of an unsettled dispute between the captain and the governor, relative to the authority of the latter over a king's ship on the provincial station. Into this thorny subject, Sir William plunges headlong. The captain makes answer with less deference than the dignity of the potentate requires: the affair grows hot; and the clergymen endeavor to interfere in the blessed capacity of peacemakers. The governor lifts his cane; and the captain lays his hand upon his sword, but is prevented from drawing by the zealous exertions of Dr. Mather. There is a furious stamping of feet, and a mighty uproar from every mouth, in the midst of which his Excellency inflicts several very sufficient whacks on the head of the unhappy

Short. Having thus avenged himself by manual force, as befits a woodman and a mariner, he vindicates the insulted majesty of the governor by committing his antagonist to prison. This done, Sir William removes his periwig, wipes away the sweat of the encounter, and gradually composes himself, giving vent, to a few oaths, like the subsiding ebullitions of a pot that has boiled over.

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