ZEPHYR BOOKS

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

The Scarlet Letter

THE SCARLET LETTER

By

Nathaniel Hawthorne

The Continental Book Company AB
STOCKHOLM / LONDON

Printed by Albert Bonniers Boktryckeri, Stockholm

CONTENTS.

THE SCARLET LETTER.

ZEPHYR BOOKS

THE SCARLET LETTER

by

Nathaniel Hawthorne

E CONTINENTAL BOOK COMPANY · STOCKHOLM/LONDON

THE SCARLET LETTER

is the most famous among the novels of Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804—64). Hawthorne belonged to a prominent Puritan family from Salem, Massachusetts, and was much preoccupied in his writings with the effects of Puritanism in New England. His greatest novel, published in 1850, is a strange romance of conscience and the tragic consequenses of concealed guilt set in Boston during the mid-17th century. An illmatched marriage is wrecked by the wife's passion for another man. She bears an illegitimate child and is sentenced to wear a scarlet letter as a token of her sin. But she stands up bravely to her adversaries and becomes a charitable happy woman while her husband is torn by lust for revenge, and her lover, a young minister, breaks down under his burden of secret guilt.

ZEPHYR BOOKS

A Library of British and American Authors

VOL. 46

THE SCARLET LETTER

THE SCARLET LETTER

By

Nathaniel Hawthorne

The Continental Book Company AB
STOCKHOLM / LONDON

Printed by Albert Bonniers Boktryckeri, Stockholm

CONTENTS.

THE SCARLET LETTER.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

THE SCARLET LETTER.

"The Scarlet Letter" was the first sustained work of fiction completed by Hawthorne after he had become known to the public through the "Twice-Told Tales;" and was the first among his books which attained popularity. He had meanwhile published "Grandfather's Chair," for children, and his "Mosses from an Old Manse." But it was not until he once more took up his residence in Salem, while occupying the post of surveyor at the Custom House of that port, that he began to hear — as he expressed it to a friend — "a romance growling in his mind." This romance was the now world-famous one, which is again offered to readers in the present volume. It was begun some time in the winter of 1849–50, after the author had been deprived of his official situation. He completed the book February 3, 1850, and on the following day wrote to Horatio Bridge: —

"I finished my book only yesterday, one end being in the press in Boston, while the other was in my head here in Salem; so that, as you see, the story is at least fourteen miles long. . . . Some portions of the book are powerfully written; but my writings do not, nor ever will, appeal to the broadest class of sympathies, and therefore will not attain a very wide popu-

larity. Some like them very much; others care nothing for them and see nothing in them. There is an introduction to this book, giving a sketch of my Custom House life, with an imaginative touch here and there, which will perhaps be more attractive than the main narrative. The latter lacks sunshine."

So much, indeed, did the gravity and gloom of the situation in which he had placed Hester and Dimmesdale weigh upon him, that he described himself as having had "a knot of sorrow" in his forehead all winter. Like Balzac, he secluded himself while writing a romance, and, in fact, saw scarcely any one. It was noticed that he grew perceptibly thinner at such times; and how strongly the fortunes of his imaginary progeny affected him is well shown by a reminiscence in the "English Note-Books" (September 14, 1855):—

"Speaking of Thackeray, I cannot but wonder at his coolness in respect to his own pathos, and compare it with my emotions when I read the last scene of 'The Scarlet Letter' to my wife, just after writing it — tried to read it, rather, for my voice swelled and heaved, as if I were tossed up and down on an ocean as it subsides after a storm."

Nor was it only while in the act of composition with the pen that his fictions thus occupied all his faculties. During the time that he was engaged with "The Scarlet Letter," he would often become oblivious of his surroundings and absorbed in reverie. One day while in this mood he took from his wife's work-basket a piece of sewing and clipped it into minute fragments, without being aware of what he had done. This habit of unconscious destruction dated from his youth. The writer of these notes has in his possession a rocking-chair used by Hawthorne, from which he whittled

away the arms while occupied in study or in musings, at college. He is likewise said to have consumed an entire table in that manner during the same period.

Finished in February, "The Scarlet Letter" was issued the next month. Although the publisher, Mr. Fields, formed a high estimate of its merit as a work of art, his confidence in its immediate commercial value appears not to have been great, if we may judge from the following circumstance. The first edition printed numbered five thousand copies — in itself a sufficiently large instalment — but the type from which these impressions had been taken was immediately distributed; showing that no very extensive demand was looked for. But this edition was exhausted in ten days, and the entire work had then to be re-set and stereotyped, to meet the continued call for copies.

An illustration of Hawthorne's literary methods, and the extreme deliberation with which he matured his romances from the first slight germ of fancy or fact, is offered in the story of "Endicott and The Red Cross," written and published before 1845. Mention is there made of "a young woman with no mean share of beauty, whose doom it was to wear the letter A on the breast of her gown, in the eyes of all the world and her own children. And even her own children knew what that initial signified. Sporting with her infamy, the lost and desperate creature had embroidered the fatal token in scarlet cloth, with golden thread and the nicest art of needle-work; so that the capital A might have been thought to mean Admirable, or anything rather than Adulteress." When this story appeared, Miss E. P. Peabody remarked to a friend: "We shall hear of that letter by and by, for it evidently has made a profound impression on Hawthorne's mind."

Years after the sentences quoted above had been printed in the second series of "Twice-Told Tales," the peculiar punishment referred to was elaborated and refined into the theme of "The Scarlet Letter."

The prescribing of such a punishment by the Puritan code is well authenticated. Hawthorne, it is understood, had seen it mentioned in some of the records of Boston, and it will be found among the laws of Plymouth Colony for 1658. A few years since, that close student of New England annals, the Rev. Dr. George E. Ellis, of Boston, stated incidentally in a lecture that there was not the slightest authenticity as to the person and character of the minister who plays the chief male part in the "Scarlet Letter" drama. Dr. Ellis held that, since Dimmesdale is represented as preaching the Election Sermon in the year of Governor Winthrop's death, he must be identified with the Rev. Thomas Cobbett, of Lynn, who actually delivered the Election Sermon in the year named; and he wished to defend the character of that clergyman against the suspicions of those who, like himself, conceived Dimmesdale to be simply a mask for the real Election preacher of that time. At the date under notice there was but one church in Boston, and its pastors were John Wilson and John Cotton. Wilson is mentioned under his own name in the romance; so that there can be no confusion of *his* identity with Dimmesdale's. Neither is there any reason for supposing that Hawthorne had the slightest intention of fixing the guilt of his imaginary minister on either John Cotton, or Thomas Cobbett of Lynn. The very fact that the name of Arthur Dimmesdale is a fictitious one, while the Rev. Mr. Wilson and Governor Bellingham are introduced under their true titles,

ought to be proof enough that Dimmesdale's story cannot be applied to the actual Election preacher of 1649. The historic particularization must be understood as used simply to heighten the verisimilitude of the tale, while its general poetic truth and the possibility of the situation occurring in early New England remain unquestionable.

I believe it has not before been recorded that, when "The Scarlet Letter" had been written nearly through, the author read the story aloud, as far as it was then completed, to Mrs. Hawthorne; and, on her asking him what the ending was to be, he replied: "I don't know." To his wife's sister, Miss Peabody, he once said: "The difficulty is not *how* to say things, but *what* to say;" implying that, whenever he began to write, his subject was already so well developed as to make the question mainly one of selection. But it is easy to understand how, when he came to the final solution of a difficult problem, he might then, being carried away by the conflicting interests of the different characters, hesitate as to the conclusion.

When this romance was published it brought to Hawthorne letters from strangers, people who had sinned or were tempted and suffering, and who sought his counsel as they would that of a comprehensive friend or a confessor.

The introductory chapter on the Custom House, upon which Hawthorne relied to alleviate the sombreness of the story, successfully accomplished that result; but, at the time of its publication, its good-natured and harmless humor roused great ire in some of the Salem people, who recognized the sketches it contained of now forgotten officials. One individual, of considerable intelligence otherwise, was known to have