HAWTHORNE NATHANIEL

THE ANCESTRAL FOOTSTEP (FRAGMENT)

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Содержание

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

"Septimius Felton" was the outgrowth of a project, formed by Hawthorne during his residence in England, of writing a romance, the scene of which should be laid in that country; but this project was afterwards abandoned, giving place to a new conception in which the visionary search for means to secure an earthly immortality was to form the principal interest. The new conception took shape in the uncompleted "Dolliver Romance." The two themes, of course, were distinct, but, by a curious process of thought, one grew directly out of the other: the whole history constitutes, in fact, a chapter in what may be called the genealogy of a romance. There remained, after "Septimius Felton" had been published, certain manuscripts connected with the scheme of an English story. One of these manuscripts was written in the form of a journalized narrative; the author merely noting the date of what he wrote, as he went along. The other was

a more extended sketch, of much greater bulk, and without date, but probably produced several years later. It was not originally intended by those who at the time had charge of Hawthorne's papers that either of these incomplete writings should be laid before the public; because they manifestly had not been left by him in a form which he would have considered as warranting such a course. But since the second and larger manuscript has been published under the title of "Dr. Grimshawe's Secret," it has been thought best to issue the present sketch, so that the two documents may be examined together. Their appearance places in the hands of readers the entire process of development leading to the "Septimius" and "The Dolliver Romance." They speak for themselves much more efficiently than any commentator can expect to do; and little, therefore, remains to be said beyond a few words of explanation in regard to the following pages.

The Note-Books show that the plan of an English romance, turning upon the fact that an emigrant to America had carried away a family secret which should give his descendant the power to ruin the family in the mother country, had occurred to Hawthorne as early as April, 1855. In August of the same year he visited Smithell's Hall, in Bolton le Moors, concerning which he had already heard its legend of "The Bloody Footstep," and from that time on, the idea of this footprint on the threshold-stone of the ancestral mansion seems to have associated itself inextricably with the dreamy substance of his yet unshaped romance. Indeed, it leaves its mark broadly upon Sibyl Dacy's wild legend in

"Septimius Felton," and reappears in the last paragraph of that story. But, so far as we can know at this day, nothing definite was done until after his departure for Italy. It was then, while staying in Rome, that he began to put upon paper that plot which had first occupied his thoughts three years before, in the scant leisure allowed him by his duties at the Liverpool consulate. Of leisure there was not a great deal at Rome, either; for, as the "French and Italian Note-Books" show, sight-seeing and social intercourse took up a good deal of his time, and the daily record in his journal likewise had to be kept up. But he set to work resolutely to embody, so far as he might, his stray imaginings upon the haunting English theme, and to give them connected form. April 1, 1858, he began; and then nearly two weeks passed before he found an opportunity to resume; April 13th being the date of the next passage. By May he gets fully into swing, so that day after day, with but slight breaks, he carries on the story, always increasing in interest for us who read as for him who improvised. Thus it continues until May 19th, by which time he has made a tolerably complete outline, filled in with a good deal of detail here and there. Although the sketch is cast in the form of a regular narrative, one or two gaps occur, indicating that the author had thought out certain points which he then took for granted without making note of them. Brief scenes, passages of conversation and of narration, follow one another after the manner of a finished story, alternating with synopses of the plot, and queries concerning particulars that needed further study;

confidences of the romancer to himself which form certainly a valuable contribution to literary history. The manuscript closes with a rapid sketch of the conclusion, and the way in which it is to be executed. Succinctly, what we have here is a romance in embryo; one, moreover, that never attained to a viable stature and constitution. During his lifetime it naturally would not have been put forward as demanding public attention; and, in consideration of that fact, it has since been withheld from the press by the decision of his daughter, in whom the title to it vests. Students of literary art, however, and many more general readers will, I think, be likely to discover in it a charm all the greater for its being in parts only indicated; since, as it stands, it presents the precise condition of a work of fiction in its first stage. The unfinished "Grimshawe" was another development of the same theme, and the "Septimius" a later sketch, with a new element introduced. But the present experimental fragment, to which it has been decided to give the title of "The Ancestral Footstep," possesses a freshness and spontaneity recalling the peculiar fascination of those chalk or pencil outlines with which great masters in the graphic art have been wont to arrest their fleeting glimpses of a composition still unwrought.

It would not be safe to conclude, from the large amount of preliminary writing done with a view to that romance, that Hawthorne always adopted this laborious mode of making several drafts of a book. On the contrary, it is understood that his habit was to mature a design so thoroughly in his mind before

attempting to give it actual existence on paper that but little rewriting was needed. The circumstance that he was obliged to write so much that did not satisfy him in this case may account partly for his relinquishing the theme, as one which for him had lost its seductiveness through too much recasting.

It need be added only that the original manuscript, from which the following pages are printed through the medium of an exact copy, is singularly clear and fluent. Not a single correction occurs throughout; but here and there a word is omitted, obviously by mere accident, and these omissions have been supplied. The correction in each case is marked by brackets, in this printed reproduction. The sketch begins abruptly; but there is no reason to suppose that anything preceded it except the unrecorded musings in the author's mind, and one or two memoranda in the "English Note-Books." We must therefore imagine the central figure, Middleton, who is the American descendant of an old English family, as having been properly introduced, and then pass at once to the opening sentences. The rest will explain itself.

G. P. L.

I

April 1, 1858. *Thursday*. – He had now been travelling long in those rich portions of England where he would most have wished to find the object of his pursuit; and many had been the scenes which he would willingly have identified with that mentioned in the ancient, time-yellowed record which he bore about with him. It is to be observed that, undertaken at first half as the amusement, the unreal object, of a grown man's play-day, it had become more and more real to him with every step of the way that he followed it up; along those green English lanes it seemed as if everything would bring him close to the mansion that he sought; every morning he went on with renewed hopes, nor did the evening, though it brought with it no success, bring with it the gloom and heaviness of a real disappointment. In all his life, including its earliest and happiest days, he had never known such a spring and zest as now filled his veins, and gave lightsomeness to his limbs; this spirit gave to the beautiful country which he trod a still richer beauty than it had ever borne, and he sought his ancient home as if he had found his way into Paradise and were there endeavoring to trace out the sight [site] of Eve's bridal bower, the birthplace of the human race and its glorious possibilities of happiness and high performance.

In these sweet and delightful moods of mind, varying from one dream to another, he loved indeed the solitude of his way;

but likewise he loved the facility which his pursuit afforded him, of coming in contact with many varieties of men, and he took advantage of this facility to an extent which it was not usually his impulse to do. But now he came forth from all reserves, and offered himself to whomever the chances of the way offered to him, with a ready sensibility that made its way through every barrier that even English exclusiveness, in whatever rank of life, could set up. The plastic character of Middleton was perhaps a variety of American nature only presenting itself under an individual form; he could throw off the man of our day, and put on a ruder nature, but then it was with a certain fineness, that made this only [a] distinction between it and the central truth. He found less variety of form in the English character than he had been accustomed to see at home; but perhaps this was in consequence of the external nature of his acquaintance with it; for the view of one well accustomed to a people, and of a stranger to them, differs in this – that the latter sees the homogeneity, the one universal character, the groundwork of the whole, while the former sees a thousand little differences, which distinguish the individual men apart, to such a degree that they seem hardly to have any resemblance among themselves.

But just at the period of his journey when we take him up, Middleton had been for two or three days the companion of an old man who interested him more than most of his wayside companions; the more especially as he seemed to be wandering without an object, or with such a dreamy object as that which

led Middleton's own steps onward. He was a plain old man enough, but with a pale, strong-featured face and white hair, a certain picturesqueness and venerableness, which Middleton fancied might have befitted a richer garb than he now wore. In much of their conversation, too, he was sensible that, though the stranger betrayed no acquaintance with literature, nor seemed to have conversed with cultivated minds, yet the results of such acquaintance and converse were here. Middleton was inclined to think him, however, an old man, one of those itinerants, such as Wordsworth represented in the "Excursion," who smooth themselves by the attrition of the world and gain a knowledge equivalent to or better than that of books from the actual intellect of man awake and active around them.

Often, during the short period since their companionship originated, Middleton had felt impelled to disclose to the old man the object of his journey, and the wild tale by which, after two hundred years, he had been blown as it were across the ocean, and drawn onward to commence this search. The old man's ordinary conversation was of a nature to draw forth such a confidence as this; frequently turning on the traditions of the wayside; the reminiscences that lingered on the battle-fields of the Roses, or of the Parliament, like flowers nurtured by the blood of the slain, and prolonging their race through the centuries for the wayfarer to pluck them; or the family histories of the castles, manor-houses, and seats which, of various epochs, had their park-gates along the roadside and would be seen with dark gray towers or

ancient gables, or more modern forms of architecture, rising up among clouds of ancient oaks. Middleton watched earnestly to see if, in any of these tales, there were circumstances resembling those striking and singular ones which he had borne so long in his memory, and on which he was now acting in so strange a manner; but [though] there was a good deal of variety of incident in them, there never was any combination of incidents having the peculiarity of this.

"I suppose," said he to the old man, "the settlers in my country may have carried away with them traditions long since forgotten in this country, but which might have an interest and connection, and might even piece out the broken relics of family history, which have remained perhaps a mystery for hundreds of years. I can conceive, even, that this might be of importance in settling the heirships of estates; but which now, only the two insulated parts of the story being known, remain a riddle, although the solution of it is actually in the world, if only these two parts could be united across the sea, like the wires of an electric telegraph."

"It is an impressive idea," said the old man. "Do you know any such tradition as you have hinted at?"

April 13th. – Middleton could not but wonder at the singular chance that had established him in such a place, and in such society, so strangely adapted to the purposes with which he had been wandering through England. He had come hither, hoping as it were to find the past still alive and in action; and here it was so in this one only spot, and these few persons into the midst

of whom he had suddenly been cast. With these reflections he looked forth from his window into the old-fashioned garden, and at the stone sundial, which had numbered all the hours – all the daylight and serene ones, at least – since his mysterious ancestor left the country. And [is] this, then, he thought to himself, the establishment of which some rumor had been preserved? Was it here that the secret had its hiding-place in the old coffer, in the cupboard, in the secret chamber, or whatever was indicated by the apparently idle words of the document which he had preserved? He still smiled at the idea, but it was with a pleasant, mysterious sense that his life had at last got out of the dusty real, and that strangeness had mixed itself up with his daily experience.

With such feelings he prepared himself to go down to dinner with his host. He found him alone at table, which was placed in a dark old room modernized with every English comfort and the pleasant spectacle of a table set with the whitest of napery and the brightest of glass and china. The friendly old gentleman, as he had found him from the first, became doubly and trebly so in that position which brings out whatever warmth of heart an Englishman has, and gives it to him if he has none. The impressionable and sympathetic character of Middleton answered to the kindness of his host; and by the time the meal was concluded, the two were conversing with almost as much zest and friendship as if they were similar in age, even fellow-countrymen, and had known one another all their life-time.

Middleton's secret, it may be supposed, came often to the tip of his tongue; but still he kept it within, from a natural repugnance to bring out the one romance of his life. The talk, however, necessarily ran much upon topics among which this one would have come in without any extra attempt to introduce it.

"This decay of old families," said the Master, "is much greater than would appear on the surface of things. We have such a reluctance to part with them, that we are content to see them continued by any fiction, through any indirections, rather than to dispense with old names. In your country, I suppose, there is no such reluctance; you are willing that one generation should blot out all that preceded it, and be itself the newest and only age of the world."

"Not quite so," answered Middleton; "at any rate, if there be such a feeling in the people at large, I doubt whether, even in England, those who fancy themselves possessed of claims to birth, cherish them more as a treasure than we do. It is, of course, a thousand times more difficult for us to keep alive a name amid a thousand difficulties sedulously thrown around it by our institutions, than for you to do, where your institutions are anxiously calculated to promote the contrary purpose. It has occasionally struck me, however, that the ancient lineage might often be found in America, for a family which has been compelled to prolong itself here through the female line, and through alien stocks."

"Indeed, my young friend," said the Master, "if that be the

case, I should like to [speak?] further with you upon it; for, I can assure you, there are sometimes vicissitudes in old families that make me grieve to think that a man cannot be made for the occasion."

All this while, the young lady at table had remained almost silent; and Middleton had only occasionally been reminded of her by the necessity of performing some of those offices which put people at table under a Christian necessity of recognizing one another. He was, to say the truth, somewhat interested in her, yet not strongly attracted by the neutral tint of her dress, and the neutral character of her manners. She did not seem to be handsome, although, with her face full before him, he had not quite made up his mind on this point.

April 14th. – So here was Middleton, now at length seeing indistinctly a thread, to which the thread that he had so long held in his hand – the hereditary thread that ancestor after ancestor had handed down – might seem ready to join on. He felt as if they were the two points of an electric chain, which being joined, an instantaneous effect must follow. Earnestly, as he would have looked forward to this moment (had he in sober reason ever put any real weight on the fantasy in pursuit of which he had wandered so far) he now, that it actually appeared to be realizing itself, paused with a vague sensation of alarm. The mystery was evidently one of sorrow, if not of crime, and he felt as if that sorrow and crime might not have been annihilated even by being buried out of human sight and remembrance so long. He

remembered to have heard or read, how that once an old pit had been dug open, in which were found the remains of persons that, as the shuddering by-standers traditionally remembered, had died of an ancient pestilence; and out of that old grave had come a new plague, that slew the far-off progeny of those who had first died by it. Might not some fatal treasure like this, in a moral view, be brought to light by the secret into which he had so strangely been drawn? Such were the fantasies with which he awaited the return of Alice, whose light footsteps sounded afar along the passages of the old mansion; and then all was silent.

At length he heard the sound, a great way off, as he concluded, of her returning footstep, approaching from chamber to chamber, and along the staircases, closing the doors behind her. At first, he paid no great attention to the character of these sounds, but as they drew nearer, he became aware that the footstep was unlike those of Alice; indeed, as unlike as could be, very regular, slow, yet not firm, so that it seemed to be that of an aged person, sauntering listlessly through the rooms. We have often alluded to Middleton's sensitiveness, and the quick vibrations of his sympathies; and there was something in this slow approach that produced a strange feeling within him; so that he stood breathlessly, looking towards the door by which these slow footsteps were to enter. At last, there appeared in the doorway a venerable figure, clad in a rich, faded dressing-gown, and standing on the threshold looked fixedly at Middleton, at the same time holding up a light in his left hand. In his right was

some object that Middleton did not distinctly see. But he knew the figure, and recognized the face. It was the old man, his long since companion on the journey hitherward.

"So," said the old man, smiling gravely, "you have thought fit, at last, to accept the hospitality which I offered you so long ago. It might have been better for both of us – for all parties – if you had accepted it then!"

"You here!" exclaimed Middleton. "And what can be your connection with all the error and trouble, and involuntary wrong, through which I have wandered since our last meeting? And is it possible that you even then held the clue which I was seeking?"

"No, – no," replied Rothermel. "I was not conscious, at least, of so doing. And yet had we two sat down there by the wayside, or on that English stile, which attracted your attention so much; had we sat down there and thrown forth each his own dream, each his own knowledge, it would have saved much that we must now forever regret. Are you even now ready to confide wholly in me?"

"Alas," said Middleton, with a darkening brow, "there are many reasons, at this moment, which did not exist then, to incline me to hold my peace. And why has not Alice returned? – and what is your connection with her?"

"Let her answer for herself," said Rothermel; and he called her, shouting through the silent house as if she were at the furthest chamber, and he were in instant need: "Alice! – Alice! – Alice! – here is one who would know what is the link between

a maiden and her father!"

Amid the strange uproar which he made Alice came flying back, not in alarm but only in haste, and put her hand within his own. "Hush, father," said she. "It is not time."

Here is an abstract of the plot of this story. The Middleton who emigrated to America, more than two hundred years ago, had been a dark and moody man; he came with a beautiful though not young woman for his wife, and left a family behind him. In this family a certain heirloom had been preserved, and with it a tradition that grew wilder and stranger with the passing generations. The tradition had lost, if it ever had, some of its connecting links; but it referred to a murder, to the expulsion of a brother from the hereditary house, in some strange way, and to a Bloody Footstep which he had left impressed into the threshold, as he turned about to make a last remonstrance. It was rumored, however, or vaguely understood, that the expelled brother was not altogether an innocent man; but that there had been wrong done, as well as crime committed, insomuch that his reasons were strong that led him, subsequently, to imbibe the most gloomy religious views, and to bury himself in the Western wilderness. These reasons he had never fully imparted to his family; but had necessarily made allusions to them, which had been treasured up and doubtless enlarged upon. At last, one descendant of the family determines to go to England, with the purpose of searching out whatever ground there may be for these traditions, carrying with him certain ancient documents,

and other relics; and goes about the country, half in earnest, and half in sport of fancy, in quest of the old family mansion. He makes singular discoveries, all of which bring the book to an end unexpected by everybody, and not satisfactory to the natural yearnings of novel readers. In the traditions that he brought over, there was a key to some family secrets that were still unsolved, and that controlled the descent of estates and titles. His influence upon these matters involves [him] in divers strange and perilous adventures; and at last it turns out that he himself is the rightful heir to the titles and estate, that had passed into another name within the last half-century. But he respects both, feeling that it is better to make a virgin soil than to try to make the old name grow in a soil that had been darkened with so much blood and misfortune as this.

April 27th. Tuesday. – It was with a delightful feeling of release from ordinary rules, that Middleton found himself brought into this connection with Alice; and he only hoped that this play-day of his life might last long enough to rest him from all that he had suffered. In the enjoyment of his position he almost forgot the pursuit that occupied him, nor might he have remembered for a long space if, one evening, Alice herself had not alluded to it. "You are wasting precious days," she suddenly said. "Why do not you renew your quest?"

"To what do you allude?" said Middleton, in surprise. "What object do you suppose me to have?"

Alice smiled; nay, laughed outright. "You suppose yourself

to be a perfect mystery, no doubt," she replied. "But do not I know you – have not I known you long – as the holder of the talisman, the owner of the mysterious cabinet that contains the blood-stained secret?"

"Nay, Alice, this is certainly a strange coincidence, that you should know even thus much of a foolish secret that makes me employ this little holiday time, which I have stolen out of a weary life, in a wild-goose chase. But, believe me, you allude to matters that are more a mystery to me than my affairs appear to be to you. Will you explain what you would suggest by this badinage?"

Alice shook her head. "You have no claim to know what I know, even if it would be any addition to your own knowledge. I shall not, and must not enlighten you. You must burrow for the secret with your own tools, in your own manner, and in a place of your own choosing. I am bound not to assist you."

"Alice, this is wilful, wayward, unjust," cried Middleton, with a flushed cheek. "I have not told you – yet you know well – the deep and real importance which this subject has for me. We have been together as friends, yet, the instant when there comes up an occasion when the slightest friendly feeling would induce you to do me a good office, you assume this altered tone."

"My tone is not in the least altered in respect to you," said Alice. "All along, as you know, I have reserved myself on this very point; it being, I candidly tell you, impossible for me to act in your interest in the matter alluded to. If you choose to consider this unfriendly, as being less than the terms on which

you conceive us to have stood give you a right to demand of me – you must resent it as you please. I shall not the less retain for you the regard due to one who has certainly befriended me in very untoward circumstances."

This conversation confirmed the previous idea of Middleton, that some mystery of a peculiarly dark and evil character was connected with the family secret with which he was himself entangled; but it perplexed him to imagine in what way this, after the lapse of so many years, should continue to be a matter of real importance at the present day. All the actors in the original guilt – if guilt it were – must have been long ago in their graves; some in the churchyard of the village, with those moss-grown letters embossing their names; some in the church itself, with mural tablets recording their names over the family-pew, and one, it might be, far over the sea, where his grave was first made under the forest leaves, though now a city had grown up around it. Yet here was he, the remote descendant of that family, setting his foot at last in the country, and as secretly as might be; and all at once his mere presence seemed to revive the buried secret, almost to awake the dead who partook of that secret and had acted it. There was a vibration from the other world, continued and prolonged into this, the instant that he stepped upon the mysterious and haunted ground.

He knew not in what way to proceed. He could not but feel that there was something not exactly within the limits of propriety in being here, disguised – at least, not known in his true character –

prying into the secrets of a proud and secluded Englishman. But then, as he said to himself on his own side of the question, the secret belonged to himself by exactly as ancient a tenure and by precisely as strong a claim, as to the Englishman. His rights here were just as powerful and well-founded as those of his ancestor had been, nearly three centuries ago; and here the same feeling came over him that he was that very personage, returned after all these ages, to see if his foot would fit this bloody footstep left of old upon the threshold. The result of all his cogitation was, as the reader will have foreseen, that he decided to continue his researches, and, his proceedings being pretty defensible, let the result take care of itself.

For this purpose he went next day to the hospital, and ringing at the Master's door, was ushered into the old-fashioned, comfortable library, where he had spent that well-remembered evening which threw the first ray of light on the pursuit that now seemed developing into such strange and unexpected consequences. Being admitted, he was desired by the domestic to wait, as his Reverence was at that moment engaged with a gentleman on business. Glancing through the ivy that mantled over the window, Middleton saw that this interview was taking place in the garden, where the Master and his visitor were walking to and fro in the avenue of box, discussing some matter, as it seemed to him, with considerable earnestness on both sides. He observed, too, that there was warmth, passion, a disturbed feeling on the stranger's part; while, on that of the Master, it

was a calm, serious, earnest representation of whatever view he was endeavoring to impress on the other. At last, the interview appeared to come toward a climax, the Master addressing some words to his guest, still with undisturbed calmness, to which the latter replied by a violent and even fierce gesture, as it should seem of menace, not towards the Master, but some unknown party; and then hastily turning, he left the garden and was soon heard riding away. The Master looked after him awhile, and then, shaking his white head, returned into the house and soon entered the parlor.

He looked somewhat surprised, and, as it struck Middleton, a little startled, at finding him there; yet he welcomed him with all his former cordiality – indeed, with a friendship that thoroughly warmed Middleton's heart even to its coldest corner.

"This is strange!" said the old gentleman. "Do you remember our conversation on that evening when I first had the unlooked-for pleasure of receiving you as a guest into my house? At that time I spoke to you of a strange family story, of which there was no denouement, such as a novel-writer would desire, and which had remained in that unfinished posture for more than two hundred years! Well; perhaps it will gratify you to know that there seems a prospect of that wanting termination being supplied!"

"Indeed!" said Middleton.

"Yes," replied the Master. "A gentleman has just parted with me who was indeed the representative of the family concerned in

the story. He is the descendant of a younger son of that family, to whom the estate devolved about a century ago, although at that time there was search for the heirs of the elder son, who had disappeared after the bloody incident which I related to you. Now, singular as it may appear, at this late day, a person claiming to be the descendant and heir of that eldest son has appeared, and if I may credit my friend's account, is disposed not only to claim the estate, but the dormant title which Eldredge himself has been so long preparing to claim for himself. Singularly enough, too, the heir is an American."

May 2d, Sunday.– "I believe," said Middleton, "that many English secrets might find their solution in America, if the two threads of a story could be brought together, disjoined as they have been by time and the ocean. But are you at liberty to tell me the nature of the incidents to which you allude?"

"I do not see any reason to the contrary," answered the Master; "for the story has already come in an imperfect way before the public, and the full and authentic particulars are likely soon to follow. It seems that the younger brother was ejected from the house on account of a love affair; the elder having married a young woman with whom the younger was in love, and, it is said, the wife disappeared on the bridal night, and was never heard of more. The elder brother remained single during the rest of his life; and dying childless, and there being still no news of the second brother, the inheritance and representation of the family devolved upon the third brother and his posterity. This branch of

the family has ever since remained in possession; and latterly the representation has become of more importance, on account of a claim to an old title, which, by the failure of another branch of this ancient family, has devolved upon the branch here settled. Now, just at this juncture, comes another heir from America, pretending that he is the descendant of a marriage between the second son, supposed to have been murdered on the threshold of the manor-house, and the missing bride! Is it not a singular story?"

"It would seem to require very strong evidence to prove it," said Middleton. "And methinks a Republican should care little for the title, however he might value the estate."

"Both – both," said the Master, smiling, "would be equally attractive to your countryman. But there are further curious particulars in connection with this claim. You must know, they are a family of singular characteristics, humorists, sometimes developing their queer traits into something like insanity; though oftener, I must say, spending stupid hereditary lives here on their estates, rusting out and dying without leaving any biography whatever about them. And yet there has always been one very queer thing about this generally very commonplace family. It is that each father, on his death-bed, has had an interview with his son, at which he has imparted some secret that has evidently had an influence on the character and after life of the son, making him ever after a discontented man, aspiring for something he has never been able to find. Now the American, I am told, pretends

that he has the clue which has always been needed to make the secret available; the key whereby the lock may be opened; the something that the lost son of the family carried away with him, and by which through these centuries he has impeded the progress of the race. And, wild as the story seems, he does certainly seem to bring something that looks very like the proof of what he says."

"And what are those proofs?" inquired Middleton, wonder-stricken at the strange reduplication of his own position and pursuits.

"In the first place," said the Master, "the English marriage-certificate by a clergyman of that day in London, after publication of the banns, with a reference to the register of the parish church where the marriage is recorded. Then, a certified genealogy of the family in New England, where such matters can be ascertained from town and church records, with at least as much certainty, it would appear, as in this country. He has likewise a manuscript in his ancestor's autograph, containing a brief account of the events which banished him from his own country; the circumstances which favored the idea that he had been slain, and which he himself was willing should be received as a belief; the fortune that led him to America, where he wished to found a new race wholly disconnected with the past; and this manuscript he sealed up, with directions that it should not be opened till two hundred years after his death, by which time, as it was probable to conjecture, it would matter little to any

mortal whether the story was told or not. A whole generation has passed since the time when the paper was at last unsealed and read, so long it had no operation; yet now, at last, here comes the American, to disturb the succession of an ancient family!"

"There is something very strange in all this," said Middleton.

And indeed there was something stranger in his view of the matter than he had yet communicated to the Master. For, taking into consideration the relation in which he found himself with the present recognized representative of the family, the thought struck him that his coming hither had dug up, as it were, a buried secret that immediately assumed life and activity the moment that it was above ground again. For seven generations the family had vegetated in the quietude of English country gentility, doing nothing to make itself known, passing from the cradle to the tomb amid the same old woods that had waved over it before his ancestor had impressed the bloody footstep; and yet the instant that he came back, an influence seemed to be at work that was likely to renew the old history of the family. He questioned with himself whether it were not better to leave all as it was; to withdraw himself into the secrecy from which he had but half emerged, and leave the family to keep on, to the end of time perhaps, in its rusty innocence, rather than to interfere with his wild American character to disturb it. The smell of that dark crime – that brotherly hatred and attempted murder – seemed to breathe out of the ground as he dug it up. Was it not better that it should remain forever buried, for what to him was this

old English title – what this estate, so far from his own native land, located amidst feelings and manners which would never be his own? It was late, to be sure – yet not too late for him to turn back: the vibration, the fear, which his footsteps had caused, would subside into peace! Meditating in this way, he took a hasty leave of the kind old Master, promising to see him again at an early opportunity. By chance, or however it was, his footsteps turned to the woods of – Chace, and there he wandered through its glades, deep in thought, yet always with a strange sense that he was treading on the soil where his ancestors had trodden, and where he himself had best right of all men to be. It was just in this state of feeling that he found his course arrested by a hand upon his shoulder.

"What business have you here?" was the question sounded in his ear; and, starting, he found himself in the grasp, as his blood tingled to know, of a gentleman in a shooting-dress, who looked at him with a wrathful brow. "Are you a poacher, or what?"

Be the case what it might, Middleton's blood boiled at the grasp of that hand, as it never before had done in the course of his impulsive life. He shook himself free, and stood fiercely before his antagonist, confronting him with his uplifted stick, while the other, likewise, appeared to be shaken by a strange wrath.

"Fellow," muttered he – "Yankee blackguard! – impostor – take yourself oil these grounds. Quick, or it will be the worse for you!"

Middleton restrained himself. "Mr. Eldredge," said he, "for I

believe I speak to the man who calls himself owner of this land on which we stand, – Mr. Eldredge, you are acting under a strange misapprehension of my character. I have come hither with no sinister purpose, and am entitled, at the hands of a gentleman, to the consideration of an honorable antagonist, even if you deem me one at all. And perhaps, if you think upon the blue chamber and the ebony cabinet, and the secret connected with it," —

"Villain, no more!" said Eldredge; and utterly mad with rage, he presented his gun at Middleton; but even at the moment of doing so, he partly restrained himself, so far as, instead of shooting him, to raise the butt of his gun, and strike a blow at him. It came down heavily on Middleton's shoulder, though aimed at his head; and the blow was terribly avenged, even by itself, for the jar caused the hammer to come down; the gun went off, sending the bullet downwards through the heart of the unfortunate man, who fell dead upon the ground. Eldredge[1] stood stupefied, looking at the catastrophe which had so suddenly occurred.

[1] Evidently a slip of the pen; Middleton being intended.

May 3d, Monday.– So here was the secret suddenly made safe in this so terrible way; its keepers reduced from two parties to one interest; the other who alone knew of this age-long mystery and trouble now carrying it into eternity, where a long line of those who partook of the knowledge, in each successive generation, might now be waiting to inquire of him how he had held his trust. He had kept it well, there was no doubt of it; for there he

lay dead upon the ground, having betrayed it to no one, though by a method which none could have foreseen, the whole had come into the possession of him who had brought hither but half of it. Middleton looked down in horror upon the form that had just been so full of life and wrathful vigor – and now lay so quietly. Being wholly unconscious of any purpose to bring about the catastrophe, it had not at first struck him that his own position was in any manner affected by the violent death, under such circumstances, of the unfortunate man. But now it suddenly occurred to him, that there had been a train of incidents all calculated to make him the object of suspicion; and he felt that he could not, under the English administration of law, be suffered to go at large without rendering a strict account of himself and his relations with the deceased. He might, indeed, fly; he might still remain in the vicinity, and possibly escape notice. But was not the risk too great? Was it just even to be aware of this event, and not relate fully the manner of it, lest a suspicion of blood-guiltiness should rest upon some innocent head? But while he was thus cogitating, he heard footsteps approaching along the wood-path; and half-impulsively, half on purpose, he stept aside into the shrubbery, but still where he could see the dead body, and what passed near it.

The footsteps came on, and at the turning of the path, just where Middleton had met Eldredge, the new-comer appeared in sight. It was Hoper, in his usual dress of velveteen, looking now seedy, poverty-stricken, and altogether in ill-case, trudging

moodily along, with his hat pulled over his brows, so that he did not see the ghastly object before him till his foot absolutely trod upon the dead man's hand. Being thus made aware of the proximity of the corpse, he started back a little, yet evincing such small emotion as did credit to his English reserve; then uttering a low exclamation, – cautiously low, indeed, – he stood looking at the corpse a moment or two, apparently in deep meditation. He then drew near, bent down, and without evincing any horror at the touch of death in this horrid shape, he opened the dead man's vest, inspected the wound, satisfied himself that life was extinct, and then nodded his head and smiled gravely. He next proceeded to examine seriatim the dead man's pockets, turning each of them inside out and taking the contents, where they appeared adapted to his needs: for instance, a silken purse, through the interstices of which some gold was visible; a watch, which however had been injured by the explosion, and had stopt just at the moment – twenty-one minutes past five – when the catastrophe took place. Hoper ascertained, by putting the watch to his ear, that this was the case; then pocketing it, he continued his researches. He likewise secured a note-book, on examining which he found several bank-notes, and some other papers. And having done this, the thief stood considering what to do next; nothing better occurring to him, he thrust the pockets back, gave the corpse as nearly as he could the same appearance that it had worn before he found it, and hastened away, leaving the horror there on the wood-path.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.