BOOKS OF MEMORY

By Julian Hawthorne

MY father, Nathaniel Hawthorne, had about five hundred books when we came back from England in 1860, and took up our residence in the Wayside, in Concord.

That is my guess: they were never catalogued, or even counted. But the west wing of the little house had been done over after our return, and the ground floor room was fitted with bookshelves and called the library. The room above it was my sister Una's bedchamber. The family used to assemble in the library after dinner, and my father would read aloud to us there for an hour or two: he was a perfect reader, his voice, grave and musical, conveying without effort every shade of meaning of the text. He read to us several great books — Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress", Spenser's "Faerie Queene", Tasso's "Jerusalem Delivered", all of Walter Scott's novels, many of De Quincey's essays, Washington Irving's "Life of Washington" — none of his own books, except the stories for children called "The Wonder Book" and "Tanglewood Tales". These, indeed, he read to us in manuscript before they were published, before we went abroad. After the astral lamp had been wound up — making a guttural sound — and lighted, he would sit in his rocking chair beside the table and begin. He would hold the book in his right hand, by the top, his fingers coming over: we seated ourselves as we pleased, but I always watched his face, lighted by the lamp. It was a masculine face, with a great, clear brow and powerful dark eyebrows over deep blue eyes. Its expression was serene, commanding, never severe; the right eyebrow had a way of lifting at passages of humor, and at times when the fun broadened he would smile or chuckle for a moment. Again, he would kindle with the spirit of the theme, and his rendering of dialogue, as in Scott's stories, was masterly. When, in later years, I did my own reading, I realized what light and charm he had communicated to the printed page: the author would seem toneless in comparison.

The library, as I was going to say, was a small room, and bookshelves had been built on the west side and on part of the north. I doubt if there were more than five hundred volumes. Some of them had been preserved from his boyhood, and showed signs of service; others had happened in, as books will, many of these presentation copies from authors or publishers; then there were a few deliberately bought. On the top shelves were small, queer looking books, mostly French: all the works of Voltaire, poor of paper and print and bound in paper; Rousseau, similarly attired. Montaigne, in a large quarto, was on a lower shelf. On the lowest shelf of all were big folios, antique and somewhat dilapidated. The most ancient was bound in brown leather, now tattered and worn at the corners, "God's Revenge Against the Crying and Execrable Sin of Murther". It was an early seventeenth (or perhaps sixteenth) century compilation of grisly tales translated from the Italian, bloody tragedies, the perpetrators of which were invariably caught and executed in ways yet more bloody. On the title

page and fly leaves were signatures in faded ink of many ancestors of our family, who had read the book generation after generation, and my father's signature was among them. Beside this terrific work was Sir Philip Sidney's "Arcadia", a very early edition in folio. The text is interspersed with numerous love sonnets and lyrics in the Elizabethan style, and several of these had been underscored and marked by some forefather of mine — one Daniel Hathorne (as the name was then spelled), evidently much in love in his day with a young woman named Mary Rondel, whose signature was likewise inscribed here and there. Daniel would mark some especially impassioned lyric and scribble on the margin, "Pray, Mistris, reade this as if I myselfe wrote it." Obviously, then, the two lovers had been wont to peruse the volume together — or he would pass it on to her as a sort of vicarious love letter.

And hereby hangs an odd little family ghost tale. My father, in his boyhood, had no doubt seen the marginal annotations, and perhaps guessed at their meaning; but after he went to Bowdoin College, at seventeen, the book, together with most of the others in the little domestic library, was transferred to the keeping of some relatives, the Misses Ingersoll. (It was only after our family returned from Europe, in 1860, that these volumes were brought back and placed in the little room in the west wing of the Wayside — where, of course, I saw them for the first time.) In 1858 we were residing in Florence, across the way from the Robert Brownings. Now, Mrs. Browning was at that time eagerly interested in spiritualism, and it happened that our governess had the fortune — or as she, being a skeptic, considered it, the misfortune — to be a medium: she did automatic writing. Her pencil would be controlled by the usual run of spiritual persons, chiefly alleged relatives of one or another of the circle, now defunct and descending from heaven to tell us to be good, that all was well, and that they were working for our benefit up yonder. Robert Browning disbelieved and scoffed, my father smiled with an arching of the eyebrow, Mrs. Browning listened prayerfully, and my mother regarded the transactions with reverential interest, if not with entire faith.

All of a sudden, in the midst of edifying and sanctimonious messages, the pencil was, as it were, violently seized — our governess barely keeping her fingers on it — and a name dashed onto the paper in a large, bold, irregular handwriting, quite different from that of any of the previous communicants — which, in fact, had seemed like feeble imitations of the governess's own. The communicant — a woman — went on to declare, in passionate haste, that she had been intimately connected with a member of the Hawthorne family, about a century before, and that she wanted the "sympathy" of Nathaniel Hawthorne!

There was a vibration of reality about this which startled all of us. There was a touch of almost savage desperation in it, nothing angelic, nothing edifying or persuasive. This was an actual person, with a suspicion of sulphur in her atmosphere, and she was grasping at an opportunity for which she had waited during three long generations. We all looked at my father, and Browning said, half laughing, "Well, Hawthorne, it's up to you!"

My father shook his head: he had never, to his knowledge, seen or heard the name before. It was a peculiar, unusual name, and in all my experience since that evening I have met with it in but one place — in the margin of the old volume of Sidney's "Arcadia",

where it stands in faded brown ink — "Mary Rondel".

Poor, miserable Mary was at all events quite sure of herself, and of some wrong that had been done her by an ancestor of ours, which had caused her, as she stated, to die in hardship and unhappiness. When I opened the "Arcadia", six or seven years later, I was startled at the inscription and recalled the incident. Then I looked at a miniature on ivory of one Daniel Hathorne, commander of a privateer in the Revolution, a handsome, daredevil sort of fellow with ruddy cheeks and bold blue eyes. The miniature is on my desk as I write, but there is no picture of Mary Rondel, and the mystery of her appeal has never been unraveled. I recollect, however, that her irruption into our peaceful gathering in Florence broke up the meeting: no other spirit could get a hearing, and the circle, to the great relief of our governess, was discontinued.

Perhaps old, favorite books, which have been pored over by readers in previous centuries, may be haunted by their ghosts. One is sometimes half sensible of an emanation — an aura — from such volumes which invests the shelf on which they stand with an unaccountable, silent charm of companionship. Or is it the authors of them that bend over us as we read and are gratified at our attention? I think, at all events, that there is more about a good book than appears to eye and touch: its virtues live and affect us; the spirit that conceived and executed it is still operative.

What a marvel it is, after all, that a packet of paper cut up in oblong pieces and stitched together, and covered with little serried black marks, should powerfully influence the minds and lives of thousands, through many ages! Writing and reading are miracles so unfathomable that we are forced to consider them both intensely commonplace.

The money value of old books is in a different category, a puzzle of a kind less recondite. When, at last, it was decided to sell my father's books, partly because of the difficulty of avoiding loss and decay in a family so vagrant as ours, I made several surprising discoveries. There was a little old brown-leather bound volume, a good deal worn at the corners and otherwise defaced, roughly printed, and full of marginal notes in crabbed chirography together with the signatures of the writers — men of the Hawthorne family, beginning with the first emigrant, William Hathorne, who was also prominent in the events which the book described. It was called "The Wars with the Indians" and was, I learned, the first book printed in the American colonies. One might have picked it up on a second hand bookstall for ten cents, but the price it brought was unimaginable — so much by reason of its extreme rarity, and as much more, perhaps, on account of the scribblings with which it was defaced, or enriched, according to one's view of the matter. I can't name the exact figure, but there was money enough in that shabby pocket volume to build a good house or to make the tour of Europe.

There were others — for instance an array of ten superb folios, "English State Trials", containing verbatim reports of the trial and conviction (on no evidence to speak of) of the famous Captain Kidd and several hundred other cases, as interesting or more so: authentic material to supply scores of novelists from now till doomsday. . . . But I find myself at the end of my tether for today, with almost nothing done. Books, like women, are beguiling.