THE OTHER SISTER

Was Nathaniel Hawthorne a salt?

BY MEGAN MARSHALL

On the evening of November 11, 1837, Nathaniel Hawthorne, accompanied by his sister Eliza (Ellie) andouis, stopped at the Peabody house, in Salem, Massachusetts. It was Hawthorne's first visit to the family, though he lived just a few blocks away. Painfully shy, he spent the previous ten years in almost complete seclusion, composing short stories at his desk in his bedroom in the hope of establishing himself as a literary writer. Eliza, the eldest of the three Peabody sisters, who were then living with their parents on Charter Street, had read and admired the stories in Hawthorne's first book, " Twice-Told Tales," which had been published that spring. She was impatient to meet him.

Elizabeth, like Hawthorne, was thirty-three years old. A woman of prodigious energy and determination, she became a formidable branch of the New England family (the Peabody Museums at Harvard and Yale, and the Peabody-Essex Museum, in Salem, were named for her distant relative), and had managed to befriended many of the leading thinkers of her time, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, who, as her lover, had written a portrait of Hawthorne in Greek verse, and who seemed to welcome her attention. Over the next few years, he visited her frequently—before entering the parlor, he would steal up to the door and peer through the crevice, to make sure that no other women were present—and they were often seen walking together in Salem. In April 1836, five months and an apartment. Emerson read her translations of French and German Romantic philo- osophy, including "Self-Education," by Baron Joseph-Marie de Gérando, which she published in 1830, at twenty-six; seven years before Emerson proposed the idea in his essay "The American Scholar." In 1834, she and Bronson Alcott, the father of Louisa May Alcott, founded the pro- grammic Temple School, in Boston. A year later, she published "Record of School," a series of dialogues between

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by her appearance. She was ‘not neat—and offended,’ he said. But he praised her for having ‘the ease & scope & suavity’ of a learned professor or high lit-terary celebrity in her talk.” Hawthorne was never told in the house servants, but then, however, these had been only si-ence from interviewers and dwindling sales. In truth, Longfellow had been put off by Hawthorne, who had suggested taking his college years drinking and playing cards. Writing to a friend in 1838, Longfellow described Hawthorne as “a strange sort; a very pungent individual, with a very pronounced originality about him,” although “very pleasant to behold.” But Elizabeth found Hawthorne’s tales of solitary apprentice- ship irresistibly romantic. In February, 1838, she sent “Twice-Told Tales,” along with Emerson’s first book, “Nature,” to Washington. America’s “people and their poets are all ballads of the nation,” she wrote in an accompanying letter, adding that “Hawthorne’s tales were the best in this line,” because “he dares to write for Beak’s sake.” She also sent his book to her brother Horace Mann, a social reformer and politician who had recently been appointed to a prominent position in the Massa- chusetts state board of education, hoping that he would hire Hawthorne to write stories for schoolchildren.

Elizabeth had fallen in love with Haw- thorne, and he, unlike Mann, with whom she had carried on an intense platonic relationship in Boston earlier in the de-cade (and who in 1843 married her sister Mary), encouraged Elizabeth to believe that she shared his feelings. That winter, even as he was estranging himself from a desultory flirtation with Mary Sibley, an attractive Salem heiress and experienced coquette, he told Elizabeth that she had written to him years before, when she had first read his stories in magazines and gift annuals. It would have made “an apologetic bed,” she said, “to say that he had felt like a man talking to himself in a dark place.” Hawthorne urged her to visit his home, ostensibly to see her sisters. When he did, in the summer night, “he had felt like a man talking to himself in a dark place.” Hawthorne urged her to visit his home, ostensibly to see her sisters. When he did, in the summer night, “he had felt like a man talking to himself in a dark place.” Hawthorne urged her to visit his home, ostensibly to see her sisters. When he did, in the summer night, “he had felt like a man talking to himself in a dark place.” Hawthorne urged her to visit his home, ostensibly to see her sisters. When he did, in the summer night, “he had felt like a man talking to himself in a dark place.” Hawthorne urged her to visit his home, ostensibly to see her sisters. When he did, in the summer night, “he had felt like a man talking to himself in a dark place.” Hawthorne urged her to visit his home, ostensibly to see her sisters. When he did, in the summer night, “he had felt like a man talking to himself in a dark place.” Hawthorne urged her to visit his home, ostensibly to see her sisters. When he did, in the summer night, “he had felt like a man talking to himself in a dark place.” Hawthorne urged her to visit his home, ostensibly to see her sisters. When he did, in the summer night, “he had felt like a man talking to himself in a dark place.” Hawthorne urged her to visit his home, ostensibly to see her sisters. When he did, in the summer night, “he had felt like a man talking to himself in a dark place.” Hawk
her care would pose for the man who married her. Hawthorne was captivated by the journal, keeping it for more than a month, and copying numerous passages into his notebook. When he returned it to Sophia, she told him that she was the "Queen of Journalizers."

Sophia's recovery was not immediate, but, if she was expecting Hawthorne, she would be up and dressing, if he failed to appear, she took to her bed and refused to see him the next time he came. Hawthorne would visit George instead, knowing that Sophia would overhear them from her room. On his way past her door, Hawthorne might have been able to glimpse her lying in her hammock, where, she told Elizabeth in a letter, she "pulled all the combs out of my hair and set it streaming like a comet over my shoulders."

She developed a sense for when Hawthorne was at the front door, feeling "just as sure it was Mr. Hawthorne as if I had seen him." She gave him a nosegay of sweet violets, which he kept in water for a week before taking one to Boston to be set under black crystal—"embalmed from every possible harm"—and mounted on a gold brooch that he intended to wear himself. Returning to Salem, he declared the brooch "too fine" for him and gave it to Sophia.

Elizabeth complained that Sophia was "cutting" her out of the friendship by seeing so much of Hawthorne while she was away. Sophia replied that "Mr. H. coming here is one sure way of keeping you in mind." She was certain, she wrote, that Hawthorne found her companionship "excessively tame" compared with Elizabeth's society and conversation, adding, perhaps disingenuously, "I think you will shine more by contrast.”

Hawthorne had promised to write to Elizabeth, but apparently she had received no response to several letters. In late April, Sophia wrote that Hawthorne had drafted a letter to Elizabeth and that "it was a great thing for him" to have completed it. She reported that Hawthorne was bringing a packet of letters for Elizabeth to Boston; he might even take the fifteen-minute train ride to New- ton to find her. Impatient, Elizabeth went to Boston and saw Hawthorne in the lobby of his hotel, only to learn that the letters he had for her were all for Sophia.

By now, Elizabeth was tired of hearing about Hawthorne's "celestial expression and about how "brilliant" he looked. After reading a book about Pennia, Sophia wrote that she hoped to travel there someday, like the retired Harvard president John Thornton Kirkland and his wife, before catching herself: "Oh! I forget. I never intend to have a husband." In another letter, Sophia mentioned that Hawthorne planned to write a story based on an incident from her stay in Cuba. She had told him that, while visiting friends in Havana, she had cleaned a wooden religious painting using her fingers dipped in aromatic oils, and uncovered a beautiful Mary Magdalene, which she took to be the work of the seventeenth-century Spanish painter Bartolomé Esteban Murillo. Hawthorne set to work transposing the scene to Colonial New England.

The finished story was "Edward Randolph's Portrait," whose heroine, Alice View, is "a pale, ethereal creature," an artist of "no inferior genius," who disrupts the war deliberations of a Colonial council when she cleans a grey portrait hanging in the council chambers, revealing a dark crevice. The colony's outraged governor rebukes Alice for daring to bring her "painter's art" into his office and for presuming to "influence the councils of rulers and the affairs of nations, by such shallow contrivances."

In mid-June, Elizabeth informed Sophia that she had received a letter from Hawthorne, which does not survive. She told Sophia that it was "quar" and written in some sort of excitement when he was fighting with some unfortunates," whom she now often in a canvas hat. In it, she added, he alluded to a second letter, written "out of his heart," but which he had not decided to send.

Soon after this exchange, Hawthorne left Salem to travel. Sophia sent Elizabeth a terse account of his parting visit: "He said he was not going to tell anyone where he was to be the next three months... that he neither intended to write to any one nor he write to us."

In July, Elizabeth began to hint that she wanted to come home. She complained to Sophia that despite all she had done for Nat—finding him a house with an ample schoolroom, recruiting pupils, teaching every day—he seemed "utterly indifferent" to her efforts. She decided to return to Salem by way of Concord, where she spent much of August with Wilder and Lida Leonad Emerson, absorbed in the public debate over Emerson's "Divinity School Address."

In the speech, which Emerson had delivered at Harvard on July 15th, he had urged graduating divinity students to "cast behind you all conforming," and to reject the pulpit, as he had done, in favor of lectures and essays "fusing a universal" spirituality. Andrews Nort- ton, one of the divinity school's founding professors, had responded in a Boston newspaper, calling the address an "inexcusable heresy and bankruptcy" and an "insult to religion." Emerson was not invited back to campus for nearly thirty years.

There was no love lost in the audience at Harvard and was captivated by Emerson's idea that, as put in a letter to George, "Power is the eternal life we find ourselves to have." A journal entry quoted by Mary Church, Elizabeth wrote that she would give her a way of understanding her attraction to the men described as "the three greatest actual power's" with whom "I am in direct relation": Emerson, Mann, and Hawthorne. She told herself that it was "the divine" in them that "clutches my imagination and melts away my understanding." Hawthorne wrote, she had "endowed enough to make a hundred husbands." But she added, "at this very moment Hawthorne may be passing out of the state of celibacy." She vowed not to write to him again.

By September, 1838, the Peabody sisters were in Salem, taking care of George, and already, Elizabeth feared that Hawthorne may have been hoping to win back Hawthorne, who had returned from his travels. She left her knitting at his house, telling her sister Louisa that she planned to spend "four or five evenings" there "in the course of the winter," and she resolved to find him a paying job. Hawthorne's finances were precarious that summer, train service had connected Salem to Boston, and his brother-in-law's stagecoach line was near collapse. Elizabeth again encouraged Horace Mann to hire Hawthorne to write children's books, arranging for them to meet in the Peabody parlor. Afterward, she wrote to Mann that she hoped "the frailty of Hawthorne's 'difidence' did not quite destroy the brilliancy of his beauty." She had more success persuading friends to give Hawthorne a political appointment requiring, as she put it in a letter to her sister Ebe, "very little time & work—and having abundant leisure and liberty" for writing. By November, she found him a job as customs collector for the Port of Boston, with a salary of eleven hundred dollars a year, which he could supplement with income from the sale of his stories.

Hawthorne was less solicitous of her...
Sophia, who read it sitting together on the deck of the Salem to Boston. Though she was not in the doorway of her room, yet she could see the figure as it passed by in the company of her friends. Her hand to her face, she turned and looked at the window, her eyes filled with emotion.

Sophia was on her way to see the engraver Joseph Andrews, to supervise corrections to her illustration of "The Gentle Boy." Sophia wrote to her father that she and Elizabeth had "passed the time" on the train reading "The Sister Years," finding it "full of wisdom" and "illuminated with wit."

The address presented as a seasonal allegory, features the New Year as a young woman who arrived in Salem on the first morning train of January, 1839. Wearing a dress "rather too airy" for winter, and carrying a basket of roses, she has come to replace her "disconsolate" older sister, the Old Year, who waits for her on the steps of City Hall, burdened with an enormous folio volume, her "Book of Chiseling." Spilling from her arms are remnants of the difficult months of 1838: "several bundles of love letters, eloquently expressing an eternity of burning passion, which grew cold and perished, almost before the ink was dry," as well as "an assortment of many thousand broken promises and a large parcel of disappointed hopes."

The New Year listens uncomprehendingly to the Old Year's litany of woe, only to give her "the first lot of hopes here in my basket." Finally, she turns away and stops the street, "a wonderfully pleasant looking figure," handing roses to everyone she meets.

Elizabeth had at last found her way into one of Hawthorne's stories. So, too, was the collection of Phaethon, Concord. There he was affiliated with a mysterious aliment that made it difficult for him to work. He died in 1864, at the age of fifty-nine, leaving behind several unfinished manuscripts.

Elizabeth lived to be ninety and became an advocate of progressive ideas, promoting abolition, women's suffrage, and Indian rights; establishing the first American kindergarten; and attaining literary immortality in Boston that year as a gathering place for transcendentalists, and a year later she became the publisher of "The Dial," the movement's main organ. In her own right, she published her first children's stories for children, three volumes of historical tales beginning with "Grandfather's Chair," in 1840. But when the series didn't sell she quarreled with her, and in 1841, in a rare ex