HANNAH WEBSTER FOSTER

THE COQUETTE, OR, THE HISTORY OF ELIZA WHARTON

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A Novel: Founded on Fact

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A NOVEL: FOUNDED ON FACT.

BY A LADY OF MASSACHUSETTS.

HISTORICAL PREFACE, INCLUDING A MEMOIR OF THE AUTHOR.

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He who waits beside the folded gates of mystery, over which forever float the impurpled vapors of the PAST, should stand with girded loins, and white, unshodden feet. So he who attempts to lift the veil that separates the REAL from the IDEAL, or to remove the heavy curtain that for a century may have concealed from view the actual personages of a well-drawn popular fiction, or what may have been received as such, should bring to his task a tender heart and a delicate and gentle hand.

Thus, in preparing an introductory chapter for these pages which are to follow, many and various thoughts suggest themselves, and it is necessary to recognize and pursue them with gentleness and caution.

The romance of "Eliza Wharton" appeared in print not many years subsequent to the assumed transactions it so faithfully attempts to record. Written as it was by one highly

educated for the times,—the popular wife of a popular clergyman, connected in no distant degree, by marriage, with the family of the heroine, and one who by the very profession and position of her husband was, as by necessity, brought into the sphere of actual intercourse with the principal characters of the novel, and as the book also took precedence in time of all American romances, when, too, the literature of the day was any thing but "*light*"—it is not surprising that it thus took precedence in interest as well of all American novels, at least throughout New England, and was found, in every cottage within its borders, beside the family Bible, and though pitifully, yet almost as carefully treasured.

Since that time it has run through a score of editions, at long intervals out of print, and again revived at the public call with an eagerness of distribution which few modern romances have enjoyed. Its author, Hannah Foster, was the daughter of Grant Webster, a well-known merchant of Boston, and wife of Rev. John Foster, of Brighton, Massachusetts, whose pedigree, but few removes backward in the line of her husband,[A] interlinked, as has been already hinted, with that of the "Coquette." Thus did they hold towards each other that very significant relationship—especially in the past century—of "*cousins*" a relationship better heeded and more earnestly recognized and cherished than that of nearer kin at the present day. Therefore, not only by family ties, but by similarity of positions and community of interests, was she brought into immediate acquaintance with the circumstances herein combined, and especially qualified to write the history with power and

effect. Nor is this the only work which bears the impress of her gifted pen. There is still another extant, of which I need not at this time and place make mention, besides many valuable literary contributions to the scattered periodicals of that day. It is to be regretted here that a short time previous to her death she destroyed the whole of her manuscripts, which might, in many respects, have been particularly valuable.

She has, however, transmitted her genius and her powers, which find expression and appreciation in two daughters still living in Montreal, Canada East, one of whom is the gifted author of "Peep at the Pilgrims," "Sketches from the Life of Christ," and "Confessions of an early Martyr," all of which have been very popular; the first having been republished here within a short period, and also in England with still greater success. The other daughter, the widow of the late Dr. Cushing who, while firm at his post as physician at the Emigrant Hospital, fell a victim to that terrible malady, ship fever, in 1846, is also author of many minor works, and co-editor of the "Snowdrop," a monthly publication of much merit in Montreal. Mrs. Foster died in that place, at the residence of her daughter, Mrs. Cushing, April 17, 1840, at the advanced age of eighty-one years.

It may seem, however, at a period so long subsequent to the actual transpiration of events herein recorded, that little could be said to throw light or interest upon the history, and even less upon the character, or in extenuation of the follies or the frailties of the unfortunate subject of the following pages, and upon which public opinion had long ago rendered its verdict and sealed it for a higher tribunal. Yet I

am happy in assuring any who may pause over these prefatory leaves that this is not the fact; and it harms us not to believe that over every life, however full of error it may be, there is an unwritten chapter which the angels take into account as they bear upward the tearful record, and which He, the great Scribe, "who ever sitteth at the right hand of the Father," and from whose solemn utterance on earth dropped the forever cherished words which have so often given life and hope to the penitent fallen,—"*neither do I condemn thee*,"—interpolates on the mighty leger of eternity for the great reckoning day.

"Eliza Wharton," generally known, perhaps, as Elizabeth Whitman, was the eldest of four children—Elizabeth, Mary, Abigail, and William; the latter of whom was a physician, twice married, and who also left a son of his own name, (William Elnathan,) who died in Philadelphia in 1846, unmarried. Her father, the Rev. Elnathan Whitman, was the son of Rev. Samuel Whitman, who was the third son of Rev. Zechariah Whitman, the youngest child of John, the original ancestor of the Whitman family. He (Rev. Samuel W.) graduated at Harvard University in 1696, and was for several years a tutor there. Thus having passed through the usual, though then somewhat limited, course of theology, he was ordained as minister of the gospel in Farmington, Connecticut, in 1706, at that time one of the largest towns in the state. He inherited by bequest one half of his father's lands in Stow, Massachusetts, and was thereby also made executor of his will. He married, March 19, 1707, Mary Stoddard, daughter of Rev. Solomon Stoddard, second minister of Northampton, Massachusetts. Mr. Stoddard was

born in Boston in 1643, and died in Northampton in 1729. This Solomon Stoddard was the great-grandfather of Hon. Solomon Stoddard, now residing in Northampton.

It is worthy of remark here that the early ancestors of "Eliza Wharton" intermarried also with the Edwards family; so that Hon. Pierpont Edwards, who figures in this volume as "Major Sanford," could be no less than second cousin to his unfortunate victim.

Rev. Elnathan Whitman, the father of Elizabeth, was born January 12, 1708-9, and graduated from Yale College, New Haven, where he was for several subsequent years a tutor. He at length settled as minister over the Second Church in Hartford, Connecticut, and there married Abigail Stanley, daughter of Colonel Nathaniel Stanley, treasurer of the colony of Connecticut, a woman of uncommon energy of character and of superior mental acquirements, (a correct portrait of whom accompanies these pages, taken from an original painting.) He died in Hartford also, March 2, 1776, aged sixty-eight years, after having served in the ministry in that place forty-three of the same. His tombstone bears the following inscription:—

IN MEMORY OF

THE REV. ELNATHAN WHITMAN,

Pastor of the Second Church of Christ in Hartford, and one of the fellows of the corporation of Yale College, who departed this life the 2d day of March, A.D. 1776, in the 69th year of his age and 44th of his ministry.

Endowed with superior natural abilities and good literary acquirements, he was still more distinguished for his unaffected piety, primitive simplicity of manners, and true Christian benevolence. He closed a life spent in the service of his Creator, in humble confidence of eternal happiness through the merits of the Savior.

"Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord."

His wife survived him nineteen-years, and died November 19, 1795, aged seventy-six. It was during the dark, early period of her widowhood that the sad events occurred which have furnished the historian and the novelist with themes of the deepest pathos, and to which prominence is given in the following pages. But,

"Woes cluster. Rare are solitary woes;
They love a train—they tread each other's heels."

So said the sublimest of poets, and so has all experience proved. Thus, in her case, this affliction did not come alone; but at a period nearly connected with this, in the dreary, solitary hours of the night,—*her night* of sorrow too,—her house was discovered on fire, which, for lack of modern appliances, was totally destroyed, with all its contents, consisting not only of many curious and valuable articles of furniture both for use and ornament, but embracing, also, an uncommon library, overflowing with rare books, pamphlets, &c., which her late husband had collected with great effort and research.

Elizabeth, the eldest of her family, was born in 1752. She was a child of early promise, and remarkable in maturer years for her genius (I use the term in no merely

conventional sense, as will hereafter appear) and accomplishments, as well as for her genial spirit and tender and endearing qualities. Her maternal ancestor, Thomas Stanley, was an original owner and settler in Hartford, Connecticut, and removed to, and died in, Hadley, Massachusetts, January 30, 1662-3.

Thus nobly descended and connected, so singularly unfortunate, and her fate so afflicting and disastrous, it is no wonder that the novelist pointed her pen to record, with historical accuracy, a destiny so fearful, a career so terrible. By her exceeding personal beauty and accomplishments, added to the wealth of her mind, she attracted to her sphere the grave and the gay, the learned and the witty, the worshippers of the beautiful, with those who reverently bend before all inner graces.

Prominent among these was the Rev. Joseph Howe, then pastor at the New South Church, on Church Green, in this city, a young man of rare talents and eminent piety. Unfortunately, the fear and excitement consequent on the hostile relation of the colonies at that time towards the mother country forced him from his position here; and he left, with the family whose house had been his home, for a more quiet, temporary retreat in Norwich, Connecticut. Soon after this he repaired to the residence of Rev. Mr. Whitman, in Hartford, for a short visit, high in the anticipation of soon becoming the happy husband of the gifted daughter Elizabeth. But Providence, in wisdom, had ordered it otherwise; and, while on this visit, he suddenly sickened and died.

However much or little of soul or of sorrow she had in this event we are not to know; but another stood ready to-worship in his place, what we will endeavor to believe was in some degree worthy of homage. This was "J. Boyer," known as the Rev. Joseph Buckminster, a graduate of Yale College, and at that time tutor in the same institution, who afterwards settled as minister over the religions society in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and whose Biography was but a few years ago published.

We have no reason to believe, however, that either of these persons was her earliest choice, especially the latter, or that, in this case most certainly, there could have been at all that sacred congeniality of spirit so deeply necessary to woman's nature, bearing out from her bosom that deathless affection which nor pride, nor affluence, nor folly, nor love of conquest, with the victory every where certain, could in any wise overcome.

The feeling that existed on her part was of circumstances only, influenced by strong parental predilection, and the desire which so often obtains in the heart of a true woman—that of soothing the love she cannot return, resolving itself at length into pity.

We might here also dwell upon the idiosyncrasies of genius as applicable to her case, which are generally banned, of whatever character they may be, and evermore shut out all sympathy, till, in despair or despite, folly is made crime. But since sin must ever be arraigned for itself, and error is prone to plead for mercy, I leave no word here that can be misconstrued or misapplied. Certain it is that Elizabeth Whitman was marked as one of strangely

fluctuating moods, as the truly gifted ever are, and of a wild, incomprehensible nature, little understood by those who should have known her best, and with whom she was most intimate. Over this, in tracing her history, it were well to pause, were it not that thus we might give countenance to this prominent fact of modern days, that the eccentricities of genius are often substituted for genius itself, or are made its prime characteristics, as the gold of the jeweller is recommended for its beauty and strength in proportion to its alloy.

However much we may regret the waywardness of such a heart in the present instance, in that it rejected one so nobly qualified as was Mr. Buckminster to appreciate its genius and its love, while sympathizing with his own mortifying disappointment, (for this we must admit,) that she had in the secrets of her nature a preference for another, we cannot altogether know its results. So cautiously and discreetly did he, through a long and beautiful life, qualify both his lips and his pen, that little or nothing remains beyond these letters of the novelist—which we may not doubt are authentic, as they were long in the possession of Mrs. Henry Hill, of Boston, the "Mrs. Sumner" of the novel—to tell how the heart was instructed, and how blighted hope and blasted affection were made the lobes through which the spirit caught its sublimest and holiest respiration. We know

"Through lacerations takes the spirit wing,
And in the heart's long death throe grasps true life."

One little remark which has been suffered to creep into his Memoirs is, however, of peculiar significance. I quote it

here.

In speaking of Connecticut to a friend, he says, "My place was there; I always wished that state to be my home; but Providence has directed my line of duty far away *from the place of my first affections*."

He also—as one who had every means of knowing the fact has informed me—was deeply affected on reading the "romance" here following, and at the time remarked that, had the author been personally acquainted (not knowing that she was) with the circumstances of his engagement with Elizabeth Whitman, she could not have described them with more graphic truth.

The Hon. Pierrepont Edwards, to whom was given the preference and precedence above referred to, and who is made to assume in the chapters of the novel the name of "Sanford," was the son of Rev. Jonathan Edwards, president of Princeton College, New Jersey. His maternal grandmother was Esther, the second daughter of the Rev. Solomon Stoddard, and sister to the paternal grandmother of Elizabeth Whitman, the wife of Rev. Samuel Whitman before mentioned. A Mr. Burt has by some been identified with this "Sanford," the rival of "Boyer," yet without the least pretension in history to authenticity. Nor can we place much reliance upon the letters here introduced as his in point of originality, as there is sufficient reason for believing that these are, for the most part, of the author's invention, founded upon the current reputation of his after years. And we may be happy in so considering them, since they would betray a character, even in earliest manhood, too depraved and debased for honorable mention, although his errors

were no doubt altogether beyond the palliation of a woman's pen. Yet we would fain look at him, in youth at least, as undebauched and uncorrupt, however stained may be the record of his manhood.

Between him and Elizabeth Whitman there was, notwithstanding, over all and under all, a close affinity of spirit; and there is no question, aside from the frailties and objections which the writer of the romance has introduced, that there was a marriage of the soul, superseding all after ties which worldliness and depravity might have consummated, that overshadows sin, and may not pass into our reckoning. Not only such a marriage, but one, though secret, actually sanctioned by the laws of the land, she is known to have declared a fact previous to her death.

Question this who may, that deep down under the impulses of surging passion there existed a purer and holier affection for her, is in history sufficiently clear. They had been set in family connection, intimate by kin, intimate in earliest life by every outward tie, and especially intimate by the subtile affinities of their spiritual natures. Yet he who can, under any circumstances, entreat the love of woman, and then take advantage of her weakness or her confidence, is an anomaly in nature, and should have a special, judiciary here and in heaven.

Since so much of the romance here following is truth, veritable truth, it is to be regretted that any error of historical character was suffered to assume importance in the narrative. Yet this is so often the case in works of this kind, that it is not remarkable here. More surprising is it that

truth was so carefully and conscientiously guarded and preserved.

In conflicting statements, it is difficult to determine the precise year of the marriage of Mr. Edwards, whether before or after the death of "Eliza Wharton," although it may have been long before, even as one of his biographers has it, and that recklessness and extravagance may have lifted him to a too fearful height from the calm Eden of love and honor, till he at length compromised the influence of both to baser avarice.

That he married Frances Ogden, of Elizabeth-town, New Jersey, for his first wife, is the fact, and the date given is 1769. Yet the ciphers may be questioned, I think, as it would make him but nineteen years of age at the time of the event, besides other considerations which make it appear more doubtful still.

He was, however, as has been already stated, the eleventh and youngest child of Rev. Jonathan Edwards, and was born in Northampton, Massachusetts, *Sabbath*. His biographer has been particularly faithful in thus recording it, as if the hallowed influences of the Sabbath upon birth have a bearing on subsequent life, and were in his case either strikingly marked or missed. He was born, then, Sabbath, April 8, 1750, and was cousin, in good or evil, to the notorious Aaron Burr. He was also brother to Rev. Jonathan Edwards, president of Union College.

His mother, Sarah Pierrepont, was of aristocratic origin, and the daughter of Rev. James Pierrepont, and granddaughter of John Pierrepont, of Roxbury, from whom descended Rev. John Pierpont, the celebrated poet and

divine of our own time. The Pierrepont family was a branch of the family of the Duke of Kingston, (Pierrepont being the family name;) and the mother of Mr. Edwards was thus cousin-german to Mary Pierrepont, (Lady Mary Wortley Montague.)

Through his whole ancestral line we trace the "laying on of hands" in the most conspicuous as in the divinest order; and thus might he be truly called a child of prayer and consecration. What pity that his biographer should have been compelled to record, "The most remarkable feature of his character was his unbridled licentiousness"! But we cannot drop the curtain here. We would relieve the picture by this somewhat lighter shade. "His intellectual energies were gigantic. As a pleader and a determined and artful advocate, he had few equals. Hence, as a lawyer, he scarcely ever lost a case in his whole practice." An amusing anecdote is related of him in his professional career.

"In an insurance case, the evidence of which was strongly against him, he went in disguise to New London, where the witnesses, mostly sailors, resided. In a loafer-like swagger he proposed and secured bets from every material evidence in the case, and thus disqualified them from bearing testimony, on the ground that they were interested witnesses." In his old age he married his housekeeper, and closed an eventful and unblessed life at Bridgeport, April 14, 1826. 'Tis well to memorize him here, and thus register birth and death on the very page that records the most mysterious chapter of his history.

Let us return to unite and conclude our story. In June, 1788, a female of uncommon beauty of person, yet with an

oppressed and melancholy bearing, suddenly appeared at the old Bell Tavern in Danvers, Massachusetts, (a drawing of which is here introduced.) She was habited in black, and was seldom seen abroad, never except alone, and at twilight, when she was observed to wander as far as the old burying ground hard by, and there to pause at its entrance, gazing long and earnestly upon its silent, scattered mounds, at length retracing her steps with the same melancholy gait and air.

Here she remained nearly a month, discovering to none her real name or situation. She passed her time in writing, and occasionally playing upon a guitar, which was the only companion of her solitude. After remaining there about two weeks a chaise was seen to pause before the door, upon the lintel of which had secretly been traced in chalk, as it afterwards appeared, the letters "E.W." A gentleman hastily alighted, and was also observed through the darkness of the evening to examine the casing of the door, and then return to the chaise and drive rapidly away.

The opinion was, by those who were cognizant of the fact, that this was a secret, preconcerted sign by which the lover should recognize the place of her retreat; and being too faintly drawn, through the darkness of the night he failed to discover the characters.

From this time, however, the spirits of the stranger evidently sunk; and in two weeks more birth and death had followed each other, and the grave had closed over all.

This stranger had, in her peculiar situation, tenderly won upon the sympathies of a few kind-hearted individuals who had made their way to her, one of whom, a Mrs. Southwick,

lived directly opposite the Bell Tavern. These were with her in her last great agony, in which all sense of guilt was lost in pity. Mrs. S. has related that no word of complaint or accusation was heard to fall from her lips, while the spirit seemed brightening with an unearthly hope, till what was charming in life was indescribably lovely in death. Thus they laid the beautiful stranger in the saintly robes of the sepulchre without censure and without accusation, not knowing how painfully she was mourned and missed, as a star shut out of vision by clouds and storm, in the home of her childhood and in the heart of a widowed mother.

She had passed under the assumed name of Walker while at the Bell Tavern of Danvers, and her wardrobe was found marked with the corresponding initials, "E.W.," although applying to her real name as well. These facts, in connection with her death, were immediately published in the Boston and Salem journals, and her friends advertised to appear; and thus were her real name and place of residence elicited.

A short time afterwards, and a stranger came and caused to be erected in the old burying ground in Danvers, on the spot where she was interred, two "gray stones," after the manner of Ossian, with the touching inscription which this volume records; and the feet of strangers, moved by pity and humanity, have worn a path to her grave which he who covets most in the world's memory might even envy.

The tombstones (which the fathers of that ancient town should shame to have recorded) have been battered and broken for relics, till much of the inscription is gone already, and the footstone entirely removed.

But I have noted that Elizabeth Whitman was of superior merit, and had been recognized as a child of genius in its most earnest sense. From her earliest childhood she had been remarkable for a deeply poetic temperament, and it appears she was recognized as a poet of no common order by the most distinguished writers of the day—Barlow, Trumbull, and others. Why her name and writings have not been handed down to us by those who have essayed to make careful compilations of the literature of the past century, I am unable to divine. She was a relative as well of the last-named poet, Trumbull, on the side of his mother, who was Sarah Whitman, a sister of Rev. Elnathan Whitman, the father of Elizabeth.

I find in the journals of that time the following poem, which, though not the best of her productions, certainly gives evidence of much poetic power:—

TO MR. BARLOW.

By his Friend ELIZABETH WHITMAN, *on New Year's Day*, 1783.

Should every wish the heart of friendship knows
Be to your ear conveyed in rustic prose,
Lost in the wonders of your Eastern clime,
Or rapt in vision to some unborn time,
Th' unartful tale might no attention gain;
For Friendship knows not, like the Muse, to feign.
Forgive her, then, if in this weak essay
She tries to emulate thy daring lay,
And give to truth and warm affection's glow
The charms that from the tuneful sisters flow.

On this blest morning's most auspicious rise,
Which finds thee circled with domestic joys,
May thy glad heart its grateful tribute pay
To Him who shaped thy course and smoothed thy way—
That guardian Power, who, to thy merit kind,
Bestowed the bliss most suited to thy mind—
Retirement, friendship, leisure, learned ease,
All that the philosophic mind can please;
All that the Muses love, th' harmonious nine,
Inspire thy lays, and aid the great design.
But more than all the world could else bestow,
All pleasures that from fame or fortune flow,
To fix secure in bliss thy future life,
Heaven crowned thy blessings with a lovely wife—
Wise, gentle, good, with every grace combined
That charms the sense or captivates the mind;
Skilled every soft emotion to improve,
The joy of friendship, and the wish of love;
To soothe the heart which pale Misfortune's train
Invades with grief or agonizing pain;
To point through devious paths the narrow road
That leads the soul to virtue or to God.
O friend! O sister! to my bosom dear
By every tie that binds the soul sincere;
O, while I fondly dwell upon thy name,
Why sinks my soul, unequal to the theme?
But though unskilled thy various worth to praise,
Accept my wishes, and excuse my lays.
May all thy future days, like this, be gay,
And love and fortune blend their kindest ray;

Long in their various gifts mayst thou be blessed,
And late ascend the realms of endless rest.

Among her papers, also, after her decease, was found a pastoral on "Disappointment," which here follows, evidently written during her seclusion in Danvers, with this brief and pathetic letter in stenographic characters:—

"Must I die alone? Shall I never see you more? I know that you will come; but you will come too late. This is, I fear, my last ability. Tears fall so fast I know not how to write. Why did you leave me in such distress? But I will not reproach you. All that was dear I forsook for you, but do not regret it. May God forgive in both what was amiss. When I go from here, I will leave you some way to find me. If I die, will you come and drop a tear over my grave?"

The poem, which continues in the same moving strain, is touching and tender, and betrays a heart full of refinement and sensibility.

DISAPPOINTMENT.

With fond impatience, all the tedious day
I sighed, and wished the lingering hours away;
For when bright Hesper led the starry train,
My shepherd swore to meet me on the plain.
With eager haste to that dear spot I flew,
And lingered long, and then in tears withdrew.
Alone, abandoned to love's tenderest woes,
Down my pale cheeks the tide of sorrow flows;
Dead to all joy that Fortune can bestow,
In vain for me her useless bounties flow.
Take back each envied gift, ye powers divine,

And only let me call Fidelio mine.
Ah, wretch! what anguish yet thy soul must prove!
For thou canst hope to lose thy care in love;
And when Fidelio meets thy tearful eye,
Pale fear and cold despair his presence fly.
With pensive steps I sought thy walks again,
And kissed thy token on the verdant plain;
With fondest hope, through many a blissful hour,
We gave our souls to Fancy's pleasing power.
Lost in the magic of that sweet employ,
To build gay scenes and fashion future joy,
We saw mild Peace over fair *Canaan* rise,
And shower her pleasures from benignant skies.
On airy hills our happy mansion rose,
Built but for joy—no room for future woes.
Round the calm solitude with ceaseless song,

* * * * *

Sweet as the sleep of innocence the day,
By transports measured, lightly danced away;
To love, to bliss, the unioned soul was given,
And—ah, too happy!—asked no brighter heaven.
And must the hours in ceaseless anguish roll?
Will no soft sunshine cheer my clouded soul?
Can this dear earth no transient joy supply?
Is it my doom to hope, despair, and die?
O, come once more, with soft endearments come;
Burst the cold prison of the sullen tomb;
Through favored walks thy chosen maid attend
Where well-known shades their pleasing branches bend;
Shed the soft poison of thy speaking eye,