

Dr. Bullivant

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THE DOLIVER ROMANCE AND OTHER PIECES

TALES AND SKETCHES

By Nathaniel Hawthorne

DR. BULLIVANT

His person was not eminent enough, either by nature or circumstance, to deserve a public memorial simply for his own sake, after the lapse of a century and a half from the era in which he flourished. His character, in the view which we propose to take of it, may give a species of distinctness and point to some remarks on the tone and composition of New England society, modified as it became by new ingredients from the eastern world, and by the attrition of sixty or seventy years over the rugged peculiarities of the original settlers. We are perhaps accustomed to employ too sombre a pencil in picturing the earlier times among the Puritans, because at our cold distance, we form our ideas almost wholly from their severest features. It is like gazing on some scenes in the land which we inherit from them; we see the mountains, rising sternly and with frozen summits tip to heaven, and the forests, waving in massy depths where sunshine seems a profanation, and we see the gray mist, like the duskiness of years, shedding a chill obscurity over the whole; but the green and pleasant spots in the hollow of the hills, the warm places in the heart of what looks desolate, are hidden from our eyes. Still, however, a prevailing characteristic of the age was gloom, or something which cannot be more accurately expressed than by that term, and its long shadow, falling over all the intervening years, is visible, though not too distinctly, upon ourselves. Without material detriment to a deep and solid happiness, the frolic of the mind was so habitually chastened, that persons have gained a nook in history by the mere possession of animal spirits, too exuberant to be confined within the established bounds. Every vain jest and unprofitable word was deemed an item in the account of criminality, and whatever wit, or semblance thereof, came into existence, its birthplace was generally the pulpit, and its parent some sour old Genevan divine. The specimens of humor and satire, preserved in the sermons and controversial tracts of those days, are occasionally the apt expressions of pungent thoughts; but oftener they are cruel torturings and twistings of trite ideas, disgusting by the wearisome ingenuity which constitutes their only merit. Among a people where so few possessed, or were allowed to exercise, the art of extracting the mirth which lies hidden like latent caloric in almost everything, a gay apothecary, such as Dr. Bullivant, must have been a phenomenon.

We will suppose ourselves standing in Cornhill, on a pleasant morning of the year 1670, about the hour when the shutters are unclosed, and the dust swept from the doorsteps, and when Business rubs its eyes, and begins to plod sleepily through the town. The street, instead of running between lofty and continuous piles of brick, is but partially lined with wooden buildings of various heights and architecture, in each of which the mercantile department is connected with the domicile, like the gingerbread and candy shops of an after-date. The signs have a singular appearance to a stranger's eye. These are not a barren record of names and occupations yellow letters on black boards, but images and hieroglyphics, sometimes typifying the principal commodity offered for sale, though generally intended to give an arbitrary designation to the establishment. Overlooking the bearded Saracens, the Indian Queens, and the wooden Bibles, let its direct our attention to the white post newly erected at the corner of the street, and surmounted by a gilded

countenance which flashes in the early sunbeams like veritable gold. It is a bust of AEsculapius, evidently of the latest London manufacture; and from the door behind it steams forth a mingled smell of musk and assafaetida and other drugs of potent perfume, as if an appropriate sacrifice were just laid upon the altar of the medical deity. Five or six idle people are already collected, peeping curiously in at the glittering array of gallipots and phials, and deciphering the labels which tell their contents in the mysterious and imposing nomenclature of ancient physic. They are next attracted by the printed advertisement of a Panacea, promising life but one day short of eternity, and youth and health commensurate. An old man, his head as white as snow, totters in with a hasty clattering of his staff, and becomes the earliest purchaser, hoping that his wrinkles will disappear more swiftly than they gathered. The Doctor (so styled by courtesy) shows the upper half of his person behind the counter, and appears to be a slender and rather tall man; his features are difficult to describe, possessing nothing peculiar, except a flexibility to assume all characters it, turn, while his eye, shrewd, quick, and saucy, remains the same throughout. Whenever a customer enters the shop, if he desire a box of pills, he receives with them an equal number of hard, round, dry jokes,—or if a dose of salts, it is mingled with a portion of the salt of Attica,—or if some hot, Oriental drug, it is accompanied by a racy word or two that tingle on the mental palate,—all without the least additional cost. Then there are twistings of mouths which never lost their gravity before. As each purchaser retires, the spectators see a resemblance of his visage pass over that of the apothecary, in which all the ludicrous points are made most prominent, as if a magic looking-glass had caught the reflection, and were making sport with it. Unwonted titterings arise and strengthen into bashful laughter, but are suddenly hushed as some minister, heavy-eyed from his last night's vigil, or magistrate, armed with the terror of the whipping-post and pillory, or perhaps the governor himself, goes by like a dark cloud intercepting the sunshine.

About this period, many causes began to produce an important change on and beneath the surface of colonial society. The early settlers were able to keep within the narrowest limits of their rigid principles, because they had adopted them in mature life, and from their own deep conviction, and were strengthened in them by that species of enthusiasm, which is as sober and as enduring as reason itself. But if their immediate successors followed the same line of conduct, they were confined to it, in a great degree, by habits forced upon them, and by the severe rule under which they were educated, and in short more by restraint than by the free exercise of the imagination and understanding. When therefore the old original stock, the men who looked heavenward without a wandering glance to earth, had lost a part of their domestic and public influence, yielding to infirmity or death, a relaxation naturally ensued in their theory and practice of morals and religion, and became more evident with the daily decay of its most strenuous opponents. This gradual but sure operation was assisted by the increasing commercial importance of the colonies, whither a new set of emigrants followed unworthily in the track of the pure-hearted Pilgrims. Gain being now the allurements, and almost the only one, since dissenters no longer dreaded persecution at home, the people of New England could not remain entirely uncontaminated by an extensive intermixture with worldly men. The trade carried on by the colonists (in the face of several inefficient acts of Parliament) with the whole maritime world, must have had a similar tendency; nor are the desperate and dissolute visitants of the country to be forgotten among the agents of a moral revolution.

Freebooters from the West Indies and the Spanish Main,—state criminals, implicated in the numerous plots and conspiracies of the period,—felons, loaded with private guilt,—numbers of these took refuge in the provinces, where the authority of the English king was obstructed by a zealous spirit of independence, and where a boundless wilderness enabled them to defy pursuit. Thus the new population, temporary and permanent, was exceedingly unlike the old, and far more apt to disseminate their own principles than to imbibe those of the Puritans. All circumstances unfavorable to virtue acquired double strength by the licentious reign of Charles II.; though perhaps the example of the monarch and nobility was less likely to recommend vice to the people of New England than to those of any other part of the British Empire.

The clergy and the elder magistrates manifested a quick sensibility to the decline of godliness, their apprehensions being sharpened in this particular no less by a holy zeal than because their credit and influence were intimately connected with the primitive character of the country. A Synod, convened in the year 1679, gave its opinion that the iniquity of the times had drawn down judgments from Heaven, and proposed methods to assuage the Divine wrath by a renewal of former sanctity. But neither the increased numbers nor the altered spirit of the people, nor the just sense of a freedom to do wrong, within certain limits, would now have permitted the exercise of that inquisitorial strictness, which had been wont to penetrate to men's firesides and watch their domestic life, recognizing no distinction between private ill conduct and crimes that endanger the community. Accordingly, the tide of worldly principles encroached more and more upon the ancient landmarks, hitherto esteemed the enter boundaries of virtue. Society arranged itself into two classes, marked by strong shades of difference, though separated by an uncertain line: in one were included the small and feeble remnant of the first settlers, many of their immediate descendants, the whole body of the clergy, and all whom a gloomy temperament, or tenderness of conscience, or timidity of thought, kept up to the strictness of their fathers; the other comprehended the new emigrants, the gay and thoughtless natives, the favorers of Episcopacy, and a various mixture of liberal and enlightened men with most of the evil-doers and unprincipled adventurers in the country. A vivid and rather a pleasant idea of New England manners, when this change had become decided, is given in the journal of John Dunton, a cockney bookseller, who visited Boston and other towns of Massachusetts with a cargo of pious publications, suited to the Puritan market. Making due allowance for the flippancy of the writer, which may have given a livelier tone to his descriptions than truth precisely warrants, and also for his character, which led him chiefly among the gayer inhabitants, there still seems to have been many who loved the winecup and the song, and all sorts of delightful naughtiness. But the degeneracy of the times had made far less progress in the interior of the country than in the seaports, and until the people lost the elective privilege, they continued the government in the hands of those upright old men who had so long possessed their confidence. Uncontrollable events, alone, gave a temporary ascendancy to persons of another stamp. James II., during the four years of his despotic reign, revoked the charters of the American colonies, arrogated the appointment of their magistrates, and annulled all those legal and proscriptive rights which had hitherto constituted them nearly independent states.

Among the foremost advocates of the royal usurpations was Dr. Bullivant. Gifted with a

smart and ready intellect, busy and bold, he acquired great influence in the new government, and assisted Sir Edmund Andros, Edward Randolph, and five or six others, to browbeat the council, and misrule the Northern provinces according to their pleasure. The strength of the popular hatred against this administration, the actual tyranny that was exercised, and the innumerable fears and jealousies, well grounded and fantastic, which harassed the country, may be best learned from a work of Increase Mather, the *“Remarkable Providences of the Earlier Days of American Colonization.”* The good divine (though writing when a lapse of nearly forty years should have tamed the fierceness of party animosity) speaks with the most bitter and angry scorn of *“Pothecary Bullivant,”* who probably indulged his satirical propensities, from the seat of power, in a manner which rendered him an especial object of public dislike. But the people were about to play off a piece of practical full on the Doctor and the whole of his coadjutors, and have the laugh all to themselves. By the first faint rumor of the attempt of the Prince of Orange on the throne, the power of James was annihilated in the colonies, and long before the abduction of the latter became known, Sir Edmund Andros, Governor-General of New England and New York, and fifty of the most obnoxious leaders of the court party, were tenants of a prison. We will visit our old acquaintance in his adversity.

The scene now represents a room of ten feet square, the floor of which is sunk a yard or two below the level of the ground; the walls are covered with a dirty and crumbling plaster, on which appear a crowd of ill-favored and lugubrious faces done in charcoal, and the autographs and poetical attempts of a long succession of debtors and petty criminals. Other features of the apartment are a deep fireplace (superfluous in the sultriness of the summer’s day), a door of hard-hearted oak, and a narrow window high in the wall,—where the glass has long been broken, while the iron bars retain all their original strength. Through this opening come the sound of passing footsteps in the public street, and the voices of children at play. The furniture consists of a bed, or rather an old sack of barley straw, thrown down in the corner farthest from the door, and a chair and table, both aged and infirm, and leaning against the side of the room, besides lending a friendly support to each other. The atmosphere is stifled and of an ill smell, as if it had been kept close prisoner for half a century, and had lost all its pure and elastic nature by feeding the tainted breath of the vicious and the sighs of the unfortunate. Such is the present abode of the man of medicine and politics, and his own appearance forms no contrast to the accompaniments. His wig is unpowdered, out of curl, and put on awry; the dust of many weeks has worked its way into the web of his coat and small-clothes, and his knees and elbows peep forth to ask why they are so ill clad; his stockings are ungartered, his shoes down at the heel, his waistcoat is without a button, and discloses a shirt as dingy as the remnant of snow in a showery April day. His shoulders have become rounder, and his whole person is more bent and drawn together, since we last saw him, and his face has exchanged the glory of wit and humor for a sheepish dulness. At intervals, the Doctor walks the room, with an irregular and shuffling pace; anon, he throws himself flat on the sack of barley straw, muttering very reprehensible expressions between his teeth; then again he starts to his feet, and journeying from corner to corner, finally sinks into the chair, forgetful of its three-legged infirmity till it lets him down upon the floor. The grated window, his only medium of intercourse with the world, serves but to admit additional vexations. Every few moments the steps of the passengers are heard to pause, and some well-known face appears in the free sunshine behind the iron bars, brimful of mirth and

drollery, the owner whereof stands on tiptoe to tickle poor Dr. Bullivant with a stinging sarcasm. Then laugh the little boys around the prison door, and the wag goes chuckling away. The apothecary would fain retaliate, but all his quips and repartees, and sharp and facetious fancies, once so abundant, seem to have been transferred from himself to the sluggish brains of his enemies. While endeavoring to condense his whole intellect into one venomous point, in readiness for the next assailant, he is interrupted by the entrance of the turnkey with the prison fare of Indian bread and water. With these dainties we leave him.

When the turmoil of the Revolution had subsided, and the authority of William and Mary was fixed on a quiet basis throughout the colonies, the deposed governor and some of his partisans were sent home to the new court, and the others released from imprisonment. The New Englanders, as a people, are not apt to retain a revengeful sense of injury, and nowhere, perhaps, could a politician, however odious in his power, live more peacefully in his nakedness and disgrace. Dr. Bullivant returned to his former occupation, and spent rather a desirable old age. Through he sometimes hit hard with a jest, yet few thought of taking offence; for whenever a man habitually indulges his tongue at the expense of all his associates, they provide against the common annoyance by tacitly agreeing to consider his sarcasms as null and void. Thus for many years, a gray old man with a stoop in his gait, he continued to sweep out his shop at eight o'clock in summer mornings, and nine in the winter, and to waste whole hours in idle talk and irreverent merriment, making it his glory to raise the laughter of silly people, and his delight to sneer at them in his sleeve. At length, one pleasant day, the door and shutters of his establishment kept closed from sunrise till sunset, and his cronies marvelled a moment, and passed on; a week after, the rector of King's Chapel said the death-rite over Dr. Bullivant; and within the month a new apothecary, and a new stock of drugs and medicines, made their appearance at the gilded Head of Aesculapius.