

The Antique Ring

By Nathaniel Hawthorne

“Yes, indeed; the gem is as bright as a star, and curiously set,” said Clara Pemberton, examining an antique ring, which her betrothed lover had just presented to her, with a very pretty speech. “It needs only one thing to make it perfect.”

“And what is that?” asked Mr. Edward Caryl, secretly anxious for the credit of his gift. “A modern setting, perhaps?”

“Oh, no! That would destroy the charm at once,” replied Clara. “It needs nothing but a story. I long to know how many times it has been the pledge of faith between two lovers, and whether the vows, of which it was the symbol, were always kept or often broken. Not that I should be too scrupulous about facts. If you happen to be unacquainted with its authentic history, so much the better. May it not have sparkled upon a queen’s finger? Or who knows, but it is the very ring which Posthumus received from Imogen? In short, you must kindle your imagination at the lustre of this diamond, and make a legend for it.”

Now such a task—and doubtless Clara knew it—was the most acceptable that could have been imposed on Edward Caryl. He was one of that multitude of young gentlemen—limbs, or rather twigs, of the law—whose names appear in gilt letters on the front of Tudor’s Buildings, and other places in the vicinity of the Court-House, which seem to be the haunt of the gentler, as well as the severer muses. Edward, in the dearth of clients, was accustomed to employ his much leisure in assisting the growth of American literature; to which good cause he had contributed not a few quires of the finest letter paper, containing some thought, some fancy, some depth of feeling, together with a young writer’s abundance of conceits. Sonnets, stanzas of Tennysonian sweetness, tales imbued with German mysticism, versions from Jean Paul, criticisms of the old English poets, and essays smacking of Dialistic philosophy, were among his multifarious productions. The editors of the fashionable periodicals were familiar with his autography, and inscribed his name in those brilliant bead-rolls of ink-stained celebrity, which illustrate the first page of their covers. Nor did fame withhold her laurel. Hillard had included him among the lights of the New-England metropolis, in his Boston Book; Bryant had found room for some of his stanzas, in the Selections from American Poetry; and Mr. Griswold, in his recent assemblage of the sons and daughters of song, had introduced Edward Caryl into the inner court of the temple, among his fourscore choicest bards. There was a prospect, indeed, of his assuming a still higher and more independent position. Interviews had been held with Ticknor, and a correspondence with the Harpers, respecting a proposed volume, chiefly to consist of Mr. Caryl’s fugitive pieces in the Magazines, but to be accompanied with a poem of some length, never before published. Not improbably, the public may yet be gratified with this collection.

Meanwhile, we sum up our sketch of Edward Caryl, by pronouncing him, though somewhat of a carpet knight in literature, yet no unfavorable specimen of a generation of rising writers, whose spirit is such that we may reasonably expect creditable attempts from all, and good and beautiful results from some. And, it will be observed, Edward was the very man to write pretty legends, at a lady’s instance, for an old-fashioned diamond ring. He took the jewel in his hand, and turned it so as to catch its scintillating radiance, as if hoping, in accordance with Clara’s suggestion, to light up his fancy with that star-like gleam.

“Shall it be a ballad?—a tale in verse?” he inquired. “Enchanted rings often glisten in old English poetry, I think something may be done with the subject; but it is fitter for rhyme than prose.

“No, no,” said Miss Pemberton.—“We will have no more rhyme than just enough for a posy to the ring. You must tell the legend in simple prose; and when it is finished, I will make a little party to hear it read.”

The young gentleman promised obedience; and going to his pillow, with his head full of the familiar spirits that used to be worn in rings, watches, and sword-hilts, he had the good fortune to possess himself of an available idea in a dream. Connecting this with what he himself chanced to know of the ring’s real history, his task was done. Clara Pemberton invited a select few of her friends, all holding the stanchest faith in Edward’s genius, and therefore the most genial auditors, if not altogether the fairest critics, that a writer could possibly desire. Blessed be woman for her faculty of admiration, and especially for her tendency to admire with her heart, when man, at most, grants merely a cold approval with his mind!

Drawing his chair beneath the blaze of a solar lamp, Edward Caryl untied a roll of glossy paper, and began as follows:

THE LEGEND

After the death-warrant had been read to the Earl of Essex, and on the evening before his appointed execution, the Countess of Shrewsbury paid his lordship a visit, and found him, as it appeared, toying childishly with a ring. The diamond, that enriched it, glittered like a little star, but with a singular tinge of red. The gloomy prison-chamber in the Tower, with its deep and narrow windows piercing the walls of stone, was now all that the earl possessed of worldly prospect; so that there was the less wonder that he should look stedfastly into the gem, and moralize upon earth’s deceitful splendor, as men in darkness and ruin seldom fail to do. But the shrewd observations of the countess,—an artful and unprincipled woman,—the pretended friend of Essex, but who had come to glut her revenge for a deed of scorn, which he himself had forgotten;—her keen eye detected a deeper interest attached to this jewel. Even while expressing his gratitude for her remembrance of a ruined favorite, and condemned criminal, the earl’s glance reverted to the ring, as if all that remained of time and its affairs were collected within that small golden circlet.

“My dear lord,” observed the countess, “there is surely some matter of great moment wherewith this ring is connected, since it so absorbs your mind. A token, it may be, of some fair lady’s love,—alas, poor lady, once richest in possessing such a heart! Would you that the jewel be returned to her?”

“The queen! the queen! It was her majesty’s own gift,” replied the earl, still gazing into the depths of the gem. “She took it from her finger, and told me, with a smile, that it was an heirloom from her Tudor ancestors, and had once been the property of Merlin, the British wizard, who gave it to the lady of his love. His art had made this diamond the abiding-place of a spirit, which, though of fiendish nature, was bound to work only good, so long as the ring was an unviolated pledge of love and faith, both with the giver and receiver. But should love prove false, and faith be broken, then the evil spirit would work his own devilish will, until the ring were purified by becoming the medium of some good and holy act, and again the pledge of faithful love. The gem soon lost its virtue; for the wizard was murdered by the very lady to whom he gave it.”

“An idle legend!” said the countess.

“It is so,” answered Essex, with a melancholy smile. “Yet the queen’s favor, of which this ring was the symbol, has proved my ruin. When death is nigh, men converse with dreams and shadows. I have been gazing into the diamond, and fancying—but you will laugh at me,—that I might catch a glimpse of the evil spirit there. Do you observe this red glow—dusky, too, amid all the brightness? It is the token of his presence; and even now, methinks, it grows redder and duskier, like an angry sunset.”

Nevertheless, the earl’s manner testified how slight was his credence in the enchanted properties of the ring. But there is a kind of playfulness that comes in moments of despair, when the reality of misfortune, if entirely felt, would crush the soul at once. He now, for a brief space, was lost in thought, while the countess contemplated him with malignant satisfaction.

“This ring,” he resumed, in another tone, “alone remains, of all that my royal mistress’s favor lavished upon her servant. My fortunes once shone as brightly as the gem. And now, such a darkness has fallen around me, methinks it would be no marvel if its gleam,—the sole light of my prison-house, were to be forthwith extinguished; inasmuch as my last earthly hope depends upon it.”

“How say you, my lord?” asked the Countess of Shrews-bury. “The stone is bright; but there should be strange magic in it, if it can keep your hopes alive, at this sad hour. Alas! these iron bars and ramparts of the Tower, are unlike to yield to such a spell.”

Essex raised his head, involuntarily; for there was something in the countess’s tone that disturbed him, although he could not suspect that an enemy had intruded upon the sacred privacy of a prisoner’s dungeon, to exult over so dark a ruin of such once brilliant fortunes. He looked her in the face, but saw nothing to awaken his distrust. It would have required a keener eye than even Cecil’s to read the secret of a countenance, which had been worn so long in the false light of a court, that it was now little better than a masque, telling any story save the true one. The condemned nobleman again bent over the ring, and proceeded:

“It once had power in it—this bright gem—the magic that appertains to the talisman of a great queen’s favor. She bade me, if hereafter I should fall into her disgrace—how deep soever, and whatever might be my crime—to convey this jewel to her sight, and it should plead for me. Doubtless, with her piercing judgment, she had even then detected the rashness of my nature, and foreboded some such deed as has now brought destruction upon my head. And knowing, too, her own hereditary rigor, she designed, it may be, that the memory of gentler and kindlier hours should soften her heart in my behalf, when my need should be the greatest. I have doubted—I have distrusted—yet who can tell, even now, what happy influence this ring might have?”

“You have delayed full long to show the ring, and plead her majesty’s gracious promise,” remarked the countess— “your state being what it is.”

“True,” replied the earl; “but for my honor’s sake, I was loth to entreat the queen’s mercy, while I might hope for life, at least, from the justice of the laws. If, on a trial by my peers, I had been acquitted of meditating violence against her sacred life, then would I have fallen at her feet, and presenting the jewel, have prayed no other favor than that my love and zeal should be put to the severest test. But now, it were confessing too much—it were cringing too low—to beg the miserable gift of life, on no other score than the tenderness which her majesty deems me to have forfeited!”

“Yet it is your only hope,” said the countess.

“And besides,” continued Essex, pursuing his own reflections, “of what avail will be this token of womanly feeling, when, on the other hand are arrayed the all-prevailing motives of state

policy, and the artifices and intrigues of courtiers, to consummate my downfall? Will Cecil or Raleigh suffer her heart to act for itself, even if the spirit of her father were not in her? It is in vain to hope it.”

But still Essex gazed at the ring with an absorbed attention, that proved how much hope his sanguine temperament had concentrated here, when there was none else for him in the wide world, save what lay in the compass of that hoop of gold. The spark of brightness within the diamond, which gleamed like an intenser than earthly fire, was the memorial of his dazzling career. It had not paled with the waning sunshine of his mistress’s favor; on the contrary, in spite of its remarkable tinge of dusky red, he fancied that it had never shone so brightly. The glow of festal torches—the blaze of perfumed lamps—the bonfires that had been kindled for him, when he was the darling of the people—the splendor of the royal court, where he had been the peculiar star—all seemed to have collected their moral or material glory into the gem, and to burn with a radiance caught from the future, as well as gathered from the past. That radiance might break forth again. Bursting from the diamond, into which it was now narrowed, it might beam first upon the gloomy walls of the Tower—then wider, wider, wider—till all England, and the seas around her cliffs, should be gladdened with the light. It was such an ecstasy as often ensues after long depression, and has been supposed to precede the circumstances of darkest fate that may befall mortal man. The earl pressed the ring to his heart as if it were indeed a talisman, the habitation of a spirit, as the queen had playfully assured him—but a spirit of happier influences than her legend spake of.

“Oh, could I but make my way to her footstool!” cried he, waving his hand aloft, while he paced the stone pavement of his prison-chamber with an impetuous step.—“I might kneel down, indeed, a ruined man, condemned to the block—but how should I rise again? Once more the favorite of Elizabeth!—England’s proudest noble!—with such prospects as ambition never aimed at! Why have I tarried so long in this weary dungeon? The ring has power to set me free! The palace wants me! Ho, jailer, unbar the door!”

But then occurred the recollection of the impossibility of obtaining an interview with his fatally estranged mistress, and testing the influence over her affections, which he still flattered himself with possessing.—Could he step beyond the limits of his prison, the world would be all sunshine; but here was only gloom and death.

“Alas!” said he, slowly and sadly, letting his head fall upon his hands.—“I die for lack of one blessed word.”

The Countess of Shrewsbury, herself forgotten amid the earl’s gorgeous visions, had watched him with an aspect that could have betrayed nothing to the most suspicious observer; unless that it was too calm for humanity, while witnessing the flutterings, as it were, of a generous heart in the death-agony. She now approached him.

“My good lord,” she said, “what mean you to do?”

“Nothing—my deeds are done!” replied he, despondingly.—“Yet, had a fallen favorite any friends, I would entreat one of them to lay this ring at her majesty’s feet; albeit with little hope, save that, hereafter, it might remind her that poor Essex, once far too highly favored, was at last too severely dealt with.”

“I will be that friend,” said the countess. “There is no time to be lost. Trust this precious ring with me. This very night, the queen’s eye shall rest upon it; nor shall the efficacy of my poor words be wanting, to strengthen the impression which it will doubtless make.”

The earl’s first impulse was to hold out the ring. But looking at the countess, as she bent forward to receive it, he fancied that the red glow of the gem tinged all her face, and gave it an

ominous expression. Many passages of past times recurred to his memory. A preternatural insight, perchance caught from approaching death, threw its momentary gleam, as from a meteor, all round his position.

“Countess,” he said, “I know not wherefore I hesitate, being in a plight so desperate, and having so little choice of friends. But have you looked into your own heart? Can you perform this office with the truth—the earnestness—the zeal, even to tears, and agony of spirit—wherewith the holy gift of human life should be pleaded for? Wo be unto you, should you undertake this task, and deal towards me otherwise than with utmost faith! For your own soul’s sake, and as you would have peace at your death-hour, consider well in what spirit you receive this ring!”

The countess did not shrink.

“My lord!—my good lord!” she exclaimed, “wrong not a woman’s heart by these suspicions. You might choose another messenger; but who, save a lady of her bed-chamber, can obtain access to the queen at this untimely hour? It is for your life—for your life—else I would not renew my offer.”

“Take the ring,” said the earl.

“Believe that it shall be in the queen’s hands before the lapse of another hour,” replied the countess, as she received this sacred trust of life and death. “Tomorrow morning, look for the result of my intercession.”

She departed. Again the earl’s hopes rose high. Dreams visited his slumber, not of the sable-decked scaffold in the Tower-yard, but of canopies of state, obsequious courtiers, pomp, splendor, the smile of the once more gracious queen, and a light beaming from the magic gem, which illuminated his whole future.

History records, how foully the Countess of Shrewsbury betrayed the trust, which Essex, in his utmost need, confided to her. She kept the ring, and stood in the presence of Elizabeth, that night, without one attempt to soften her stern hereditary temper, in behalf of the former favorite. The next day, the earl’s noble head rolled upon the scaffold. On her death-bed, tortured, at last, with a sense of the dreadful guilt which she had taken upon her soul, the wicked countess sent for Elizabeth, revealed the story of the ring, and besought forgiveness for her treachery. But the queen, still obdurate, even while remorse for past obduracy was tugging at her heart-strings, shook the dying woman in her bed, as if struggling with death for the privilege of wreaking her revenge and spite. The spirit of the countess passed away, to undergo the justice, or receive the mercy, of a higher tribunal; and tradition says, that the fatal ring was found upon her breast, where it had imprinted a dark red circle, resembling the effect of the intensest heat. The attendants, who prepared the body for burial, shuddered, whispering one to another, that the ring must have derived its heat from the glow of infernal fire. They left it on her breast, in the coffin, and it went with that guilty woman to the tomb.

Many years afterwards, when the church that contained the monuments of the Shrewsbury family, was desecrated by Cromwell’s soldiers, they broke open the ancestral vaults, and stole whatever was valuable from the noble personages who reposed there. Merlin’s antique ring passed into the possession of a stout serjeant of the Ironsides, who thus became subject to the influences of the evil spirit that still kept his abode within the gem’s enchanted depths. The serjeant was soon slain in battle, thus transmitting the ring, though without any legal form of testament, to a gay cavalier, who forthwith pawned it, and expended the money in liquor, which speedily brought him to the grave. We next catch the sparkle of the magic diamond at various epochs of the merry reign of Charles the Second. But its sinister fortune still attended it. From

whatever hand this ring of portent came, and whatever finger it encircled, ever it was the pledge of deceit between man and man, or man and woman, of faithless vows, and unhallowed passion; and whether to lords and ladies, or to village-maids—for sometimes it found its way so low,—still it brought nothing but sorrow and disgrace. No purifying deed was done, to drive the fiend from his bright home in this little star. Again, we hear of it at a later period, when Sir Robert Walpole bestowed the ring, among far richer jewels, on the lady of a British legislator, whose political honor he wished to undermine. Many a dismal and unhappy tale might be wrought out of its other adventures. All this while, its ominous tinge of dusky red had been deepening and darkening, until, if laid upon white paper, it cast the mingled hue of night and blood, strangely illuminated with scintillating light, in a circle round about. But this peculiarity only made it the more valuable.

Alas, the fatal ring! When shall its dark secret be discovered, and the doom of ill, inherited from one possessor to another, be finally revoked?

The legend now crosses the Atlantic, and comes down to our own immediate time. In a certain church of our city, not many evenings ago, there was a contribution for a charitable object. A fervid preacher had poured out his whole soul in a rich and tender discourse, which had at least excited the tears, and perhaps the more effectual sympathy, of a numerous audience. While the choristers sang sweetly, and the organ poured forth its melodious thunder, the deacons passed up and down the aisles, and along the galleries, presenting their mahogany boxes, in which each person deposited whatever sum he deemed it safe to lend to the Lord, in aid of human wretchedness. Charity became audible—chink, chink, chink,—as it fell, drop by drop, into the common receptacle. There was a hum—a stir,—the subdued bustle of people putting their hands into their pockets; while, ever and anon, a vagrant coin fell upon the floor, and rolled away, with long reverberation, into some inscrutable corner.

At length, all having been favored with an opportunity to be generous, the two deacons placed their boxes on the communion-table, and thence, at the conclusion of the services, removed them into the vestry. Here these good old gentlemen sat down together, to reckon the accumulated treasure.

“Fie, fie, brother Tilton,” said Deacon Trott, peeping into Deacon Tilton’s box, “what a heap of copper you have picked up! Really, for an old man, you must have had a heavy job to lug it along. Copper! copper! copper! Do people expect to get admittance into Heaven at the price of a few coppers?”

“Don’t wrong them, brother,” answered Deacon Tilton, a simple and kindly old man. “Copper may do more for one person, than gold will for another. In the galleries, where I present my box, we must not expect such a harvest as you gather among the gentry in the broad-aisle, and all over the floor of the church. My people are chiefly poor mechanics and laborers, sailors, seamstresses, and servant-maids, with a most uncomfortable intermixture of roguish school-boys.”

“Well, well,” said Deacon Trott;—“but there is a great deal, brother Tilton, in the method of presenting a contribution-box. It is a knack that comes by nature, or not at all.”

They now proceeded to sum up the avails of the evening, beginning with the receipts of Deacon Trott. In good sooth, that worthy personage had reaped an abundant harvest, in which he prided himself no less, apparently, than if every dollar had been contributed from his own individual pocket. Had the good deacon been meditating a jaunt to Texas, the treasures of the mahogany-box might have sent him on his way rejoicing. There were bank-notes, mostly, it is true, of the smallest denominations in the giver’s pocket-book, yet making a goodly average upon the whole. The most splendid contribution was a check for a hundred dollars, bearing the

name of a distinguished merchant, whose liberality was duly celebrated in the newspapers of the next day. No less than seven half eagles, together with an English sovereign, glittered amidst an indiscriminate heap of silver; the box being polluted with nothing of the copper kind; except a single bright new cent, wherewith a little boy had performed his first charitable act.

“Very well! very well indeed!” said Deacon Trott, self-approvingly. “A handsome evening’s work! And now, brother Tilton, let’s see whether you can match it.”

Here was a sad contrast! They poured forth Deacon Tilton’s treasure upon the table, and it really seemed as if the whole copper coinage of the country, together with an amazing quantity of shopkeepers’ tokens, and English and Irish half-pence, mostly of base metal, had been congregated into the box. There was a very substantial pencil-case, and the semblance of a shilling; but the latter proved to be made of tin, and the former of German silver. A gilded brass button was doing duty as a gold coin, and a folded shop-bill had assumed the character of a bank-note. But Deacon Tilton’s feelings were much revived, by the aspect of another bank-note, new and crisp, adorned with beautiful engravings, and stamped with the indubitable word, TWENTY, in large black letters. Alas! it was a counterfeit. in short, the poor old Deacon was no less unfortunate than those who trade with fairies, and whose gains are sure to be transformed into dried leaves, pebbles, and other valuables of that kind.

“I believe the Evil One is in the box,” said he, with some vexation.

“Well done, Deacon Tilton!” cried his brother Trott, with a hearty laugh.—“You ought to have a statue in copper.

“Never mind, brother,” replied the good Deacon, recovering his temper. “I’ll bestow ten dollars from my own pocket, and may Heaven’s blessing go along with it! But look! what do you call this?”

Under the copper mountain, which it had cost them so much toil to remove, lay an antique ring! It was enriched with a diamond, which, so soon as it caught the light, began to twinkle and glimmer, emitting the whitest and purest lustre that could possibly be conceived. It was as brilliant as if some magician had condensed the brightest star in heaven into a compass fit to be set in a ring, for a lady’s delicate finger.

“How is this?” said Deacon Trott, examining it carefully, in the expectation of finding it as worthless as the rest of his colleague’s treasure. “Why, upon my word, this seems to be a real diamond, and of the purest water. Whence could it have come?”

“Really, I cannot tell,” quoth Deacon Tilton, “for my spectacles were so misty that all faces looked alike. But now I remember, there was a flash of light came from the box, at one moment; but it seemed a dusky red, instead of a pure white, like the sparkle of this gem. Well; the ring will make up for the copper; but I wish the giver had thrown its history into the box along with it.”

It has been our good luck to recover a portion of that history. After transmitting misfortune from one possessor to another, ever since the days of British Merlin, the identical ring which Queen Elizabeth gave to the Earl of Essex was finally thrown into the contribution-box of a New-England church. The two deacons deposited it in the glass-case of a fashionable jeweller, of whom it was purchased by the humble rehearser of this legend, in the hope that it may be allowed to sparkle on a fair lady’s finger. Purified from the foul fiend, so long its inhabitant, by a deed of unostentatious charity, and now made the symbol of faithful and devoted love, the gentle bosom of its new possessor need fear no sorrow from its influence.

“Very pretty!—Beautiful!—How original!—How sweetly written!—What nature!—What imagination!—What power!—What pathos!—What exquisite humor!”—were the exclamations of Edward Caryl’s kind and generous auditors, at the conclusion of the legend.

“It is a pretty tale,” said Miss Pemberton, who, conscious that her praise was to that of all others as a diamond to a pebble, was therefore the less liberal in awarding it. “It is really a pretty tale, and very proper for any of the Annuals. But, Edward, your moral does not satisfy me. What thought did you embody in the ring?”

“Oh, Clara, this is too bad!” replied Edward, with a half-reproachful smile.—“You know that I can never separate the idea from the symbol in which it manifests itself. However, we may suppose the Gem to be the human heart, and the Evil Spirit to be Falsehood, which, in one guise or another, is the fiend that causes all the sorrow and trouble in the world. I beseech you, to let this suffice.”

“It shall,” said Clara, kindly. “And believe me, whatever the world may say of the story, I prize it far above the diamond which enkindled your imagination.”