

Little Pilgrimages

The Romance of
**Old New England
Churches**

By
Mary C. Crawford

Author of
"The Romance of Old New England
Roottrees," etc.

Illustrated



Boston
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THE
ROMANCE OF OLD NEW
ENGLAND CHURCHES

A PRE-REVOLUTIONARY
BELLE

“ This humble stone,
In memory of
Elizabeth Whitman,
Is inscribed by her weeping friends, to whom she
Endeared herself
By uncommon tenderness and affection.
Endowed with superior acquirements, she was
Still more distinguished
By humility and benevolence.
Let candour throw a veil over her frailties, for
Great was her charity to others.

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She sustained the last painful scene
Far from every friend,
And exhibited an example of calm resignation.
Her departure was on the 25th of July, 1788,
In the 37th year of her age.
The tears of strangers watered her grave."

ONE could scarcely find a romance more inextricably interwoven with the lives of eighteenth-century New England ministers than that of the woman to whom this stone still stands (though sadly worn) in the old burying-ground at Peabody, near Salem. A mystery for many years, the inscription — and the traditions to which it gave rise — is believed by many to have furnished Hawthorne with the inspiration for the central character in his "Scarlet Letter." Only within the last dozen or so years have we come to know quite certainly that the heroine of the suggestive tablet was the daughter of a well-known Hartford clergyman, and a

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descendant through her mother from that Stanley renowned as the friend of William Shakespeare.

In a novel called "The Coquette," first published in 1800, by Mrs. Hannah Foster, wife of a minister at Brighton, Massachusetts, the facts of Elizabeth Whitman's curiously checkered career were so entertainingly distorted, and the character of the heroine, called "Eliza Wharton" throughout the book, so maliciously misrepresented, that the novel ran through endless editions, and was in its day second only in interest to the well-known stories of "Clarissa Harlowe" and "Charlotte Temple." In style the three books are indeed very similar, and the character of the seducer of "Eliza Wharton" is undoubtedly modelled upon that of the Lovelace in Richardson's novel. But the book, as has been said, is notoriously careless of the

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facts in Elizabeth Whitman's life, and its author, though a kinswoman of the girl whose sad story she essays to tell, has put the worst possible construction upon every incident in a career which, full to the brim as it is of mystery, one yet cannot examine and believe sinful.

On her mother's side, as already stated, Elizabeth Whitman was akin to Thomas Stanley, who, when he came to Hartford in 1636, brought with him some curious old Stanley silver and the tradition that he was a descendant of Shakespeare's friend. This Stanley rose to be one of the governor's assistants. And it was his great-grandson, Nathaniel Stanley, treasurer of the Colony of Connecticut, who, in 1750, gave his daughter Abigail in marriage at Hartford to the Reverend El-nathan Whitman, pastor of the Second Church, and one of the fellows of the Cor-



THE PRESENT HOME OF THE SECOND CHURCH IN
HARTFORD (1825)

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poration of Yale College, — a man distinguished for scholarly traits, the love of rare manuscripts and forgotten books, and whose library at the time of its destruction in 1831 had been for years the envy of our large universities.

Thus Elizabeth Whitman, inheriting all the grace and culture of the Stanley blood, was born into the best society of her State and time. Her mother was a woman of rare intelligence, and of great beauty, her father a man of prominent and significant character; and his family was not of mean origin, for Trumbull, the poet, Wadsworth, the wealthy benefactor of Hartford, Jonathan Edwards, the distinguished theologian, and Joseph Buckminster, afterward renowned as a Puritan preacher of parts, were all his kin.

Very early Elizabeth, being beautiful, lively, and intelligent, attracted to her side

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the most distinguished youths of the college and the State. She attended the Hartford Dancing Assembly — whose routs began at 6 P. M. — and was a belle in every sense of the word. Her first accepted lover was the Reverend Joseph Howe, of Church Green in Boston, a young man of rare talents, who had been driven from his charge in Massachusetts by the outbreak of the Revolution, and had taken refuge with a party of friends at Norwich, Connecticut. Here his health failed, and as the state of Boston made it impossible for him to return, Elizabeth's father invited him to Hartford. At once he proceeded to fall in love with the beautiful daughter of the house. The match seems, however, to have been made more by the parents of the young lady than by her own wish. But when her lover's never vigorous health gave way under the rigours of a

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New England winter, she nursed him with tenderness, and for some time after his death mourned him sincerely.

A far more serious grief to her was her father's death, which soon followed, and which entailed for the three daughters and the one young son of the house considerable deprivation on account of poverty. The family should have been wealthy, but William Stanley, Mrs. Whitman's brother, had been persuaded to leave his large property to the Second Church, and so it came to pass that the wife and children of the old minister were seriously embarrassed by the loss of their father's salary.

It was perhaps for this reason that Elizabeth was again urged to marry, and soon became the betrothed of her cousin, the Reverend Joseph Buckminster, whose name and memory is an illuminated page

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in the history of New England Congregationalism. Young Buckminster was born at Rutland, Massachusetts, in 1751. He was the son of a Puritan clergyman and of a Puritan clergyman's daughter. Even in youth the tenets of Calvinism seemed to him of all-absorbing interest, and while an undergraduate at Yale College, — a stage of life usually given to lighter matters, — he experienced "conversion" of the most thoroughgoing and soul-trying type.

Certainly a man of this mould could have had little in his nature to attract the love of so high-strung and ardent a maiden as Elizabeth Whitman. But she met him soon after her father's death, while on a visit to the family of the president of Yale College, and he pleaded his suit with all the earnestness of a deeply sincere nature. The result was that she made up her mind

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to accept his hand in spite of many friends who counselled her against the step. Buckminster was a teacher at Yale at this time, — he had been graduated in 1770, — and the companion, though he could scarcely have been the friend, of Aaron Burr and Pierrepont Edwards, both of whom were connections of the fair Elizabeth. Possibly it was the very goodness of Buckminster, strongly contrasted as it must have been with the lives of these others, that drew from the minister's daughter that sweet affection she undoubtedly gave him.

Unfortunately, however, there was deeply seated in this man's nature a terrible tendency to hypochondria, from which any girl of healthful and cheerful disposition might well shrink. That Elizabeth Whitman was repelled by this trait in her lover there is small doubt. Moreover,

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she must have felt that marriage with him would bind her to a narrow field of duty and demand of her a degree of self-renunciation quite fatal to her best development. In those days marriage with a strong man from whom one differed in one's views of things always meant that the wife's personality must perish.

It was while discussing the pros and cons of this alliance with Pierrepont Edwards, her cousin, — a man whose personal character was, however, as far as possible removed from that of his distinguished father, Jonathan Edwards, the theologian, — that Mr. Buckminster one summer's afternoon surprised Elizabeth in the arbour of the house at New Haven where she was staying as guest, and dealt her an unmanly blow. The tutor had come for his final answer, and finding his fiancée in confidential intercourse with a man whom he

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hated and distrusted, he retreated in a fit of terrible anger but without speaking a single word.

After waiting a reasonable time Elizabeth wrote to Mr. Buckminster, who seems in the meantime to have accepted a call to Portsmouth, N. H., to tell him the subject of her conversation with her cousin on that fateful day. And she added that she had intended her answer to his suit to be "Yes." The minister's reply was the announcement of his approaching marriage to the daughter of the Reverend Mr. Stevens, of Kittery, near Portsmouth. Naturally Elizabeth said no more.

Buckminster was in 1779 ordained clergyman of the North Church in the old town by the sea. There, three years later, he brought home his wife, and May 26, 1784, his first son — a brilliant lad even in his early youth — was born. Mrs.

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Buckminster appears to have been a lady of very elegant and cultivated mind, but she died when her child was very young and so disappears from view.

No such peaceful end was, however, to crown Elizabeth Whitman's life. On the contrary, this flower of our Revolutionary New England was to be ruthlessly trampled upon by a fate which has visited few other women so harshly. Not that the loss of her lovers was a blow from which her buoyant nature could not recover. Her letters at this period of her life are those of a light-hearted, fanciful, and altogether healthful woman. One dated May 10, 1779, — the year of Buckminster's heartless desertion, and addressed to a young poet friend, — reads as follows: "I have spent the evening in company before walking half a mile. It is now one o'clock. Judge, then, if I can pretend to

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find fault with you at present? No, really: I am too tired and too good-humoured; but for your encouragement I will tell you that I have a sheet full of hints and sketches in that way which I have taken down when I felt most disposed to be severe, and I intend to work them into a sort of satire at the first opportunity." [She herself wrote good verse.] "I heard last night from Mr. Dwight that he will soon take a journey to camp. He will certainly either go or return by way of New Haven, so you will be able to consult him yourself. I fervently wish you may, for I know of no person so capable of advising you. I shall depend upon seeing you before you set out on your tour." The "Mr. Dwight" so pleasantly referred to here was the honoured president of Yale, busy about this time in altering Watts's Hymns with Joel Barlow, the

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good friend to whom this letter is addressed.

This young man was the husband of Ruth Baldwin, with whom Elizabeth had recently been on a visit. The only authentic Elizabeth Whitman letters in existence are those merely friendly ones addressed to the Barlows during this period of our heroine's life, between her twenty-ninth and thirty-second year. She had first met Joel Barlow and Ruth Baldwin, to whom the poet was even then engaged to be married, at a Christmas party in New Haven in 1778. At a game of forfeits, Joel and Elizabeth were ordered to play the part of man and wife for the whole evening. This game they carried out with great spirit, adopting the nine Muses as their children. Melpomene, Barlow's favourite because he was already well-known as a poet, is caricatured in the correspondence

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which followed between the two friends as "Quammeny," and his wife is constantly called in the letters his "second wife," a playful allusion on Elizabeth Whitman's part to the Christmas party game.

Because of his poverty young Barlow had not been welcomed as a suitor by his bride's family, and the result of this was that he married Miss Baldwin while she was away upon a visit, an offence which remained for many years unforgiven by the Baldwins. In this unpleasantness the pair had the keenest sympathy and interest of Elizabeth Whitman, and at the very time when she was supposed to be brokenheartedly lamenting Buckminster's desertion, she was really interesting herself in the crockery and furniture of the Barlow establishment. The letters that tell us this were discovered long after both Barlow and Elizabeth had passed away,

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tied together in a packet labelled "Bessie Whitman's Letters" in the handwriting of her correspondent, by Mrs. Caroline H. Dall, a distant cousin of Elizabeth Whitman, and the one writer who has interested herself in defending the fair fame of the beautiful girl.¹

The Barlows never had any children, but Mrs. Barlow ultimately adopted as her own her stepsister, twenty years younger than herself, — an exquisite creature who enjoyed the distinction of being sought in marriage by General Lafayette.

It is at the next stage of the story that the real tragedy of Elizabeth Whitman's life begins to dawn. She has now reached the age of thirty-six, and, so far as her friends and family know, she is still unmarried. Yet in the background of her

¹ See "The Romance of the Association," by Mrs. Dall.

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life hovered an unknown man. That she had linked her fate to that of some one who hesitated to acknowledge her publicly is the only charitable solution of her story's mystery. Mrs. Dall believes that her life had been joined to that of a French officer — probably a man of rank — stationed at Newport, and that the records of the marriage, performed by a Catholic priest, perished long ago in fire. But of this Elizabeth's kindred and friends knew nothing. And the neighbours made unpleasant remarks. One visitor, her cousin, Jeremiah Wadsworth, was often seen about this time leaving her society at what was called "unseemly hours," and in May, 1788, she was reported to have changed at the bank a large quantity of foreign gold. To add to the murkiness of the situation her health faltered, and her spirits were often sadly depressed.

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Then there came from Mrs. Henry Hill, of Boston, an invitation to visit her, which, in view of Elizabeth's debility and the comments of the gossips, was very eagerly accepted. So at midday in the spring of 1788 the still beautiful young woman left her home for what proved to be forever. But the stage-coach did not carry her to her friend's house, as her people believed it would. That she took this conveyance has always been known, but where she left it has remained a mystery. In a letter just received from Mrs. Dall I have, however, learned that Elizabeth Whitman's alighting-place was at Killingly, forty-seven miles east of her Hartford home. There she told her story to Mr. Howe, the clergyman of the place, — the brother of that Reverend Joseph Howe to whom she had once been engaged and whom she had tenderly nursed until death claimed him.

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Both Mr. Howe and his wife were friends of Elizabeth's dead father, and they were very glad indeed to aid her in her sad predicament. She undoubtedly convinced them that it was necessary to keep her marriage secret. And so loyal were they to their promise then made to her that only at this late day, more than one hundred years afterward, does the fact of her visit come out, told to Mrs. Dall by their own granddaughter, and by Mrs. Dall — herself an old lady now — passed over to me. But Elizabeth could not stop at Killingly. She must hasten on to the sleepy little town of Danvers, which was to witness the tragic last act of her life. Apparently she had arranged to meet her husband at this obscure place.

We have long known that it was from Watertown that our heroine drove in a hired vehicle to Danvers. How she reached

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Watertown was not so clear. But it is now divulged that Mr. and Mrs. Howe drove her in their own carriage so far on her way, a touching service indeed for these good Connecticut folk to render a forlorn woman who, save for death, had been their sister.

It was a bright June day in 1788 which brought to the old Bell Tavern in Danvers a sweet and gracious woman who registered as Mrs. Walker and said she would stay until her husband came. And then the weeks went by as Elizabeth Whitman waited. Meanwhile Mrs. Hill watched anxiously for a guest who did not come, and down in Hartford the poor widowed mother patiently endured the anguish of her child's disappearance and the scandal that people insisted on making out of it.

Gentle and graceful in all that she did, the stranger was soon the admired of all

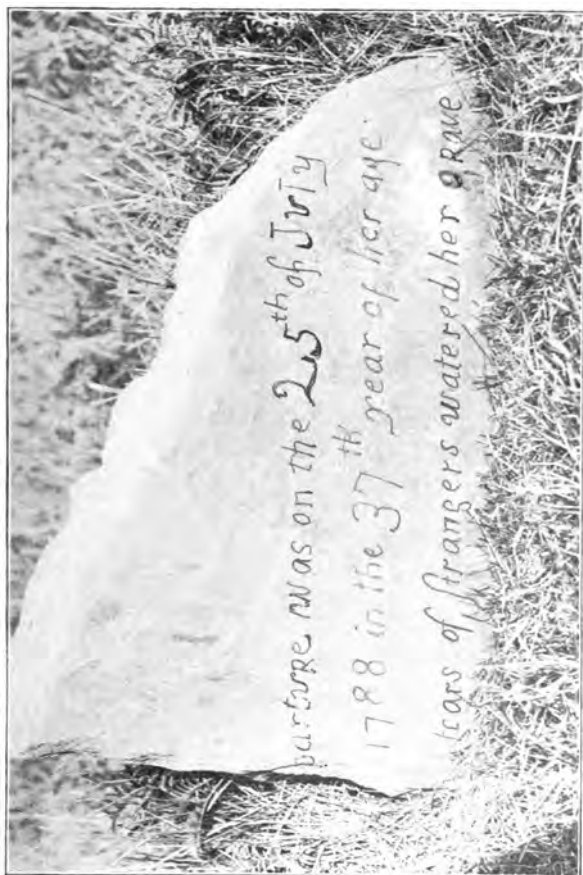
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admirers in the little village. She would sit at the south window of her chamber for days at a time watching, ever watching, for some one who came not, whiling away the long hours of the languorous summer mornings with the guitar and her industrious needle. Some of that wondrous skill in sewing which Hawthorne makes one of the attributes of Hester Prynne, the lady of the Bell Tavern certainly possessed. And this skill in needlework, together with her pleasing ways, soon made her a favourite with the women of the town, who, though they were of the strict Puritanical type and faith, sympathized deeply with her as she posted and received letters from one she called her husband and fashioned dainty little garments with her clever needle. But she kept forever locked in her heart whatever tale she might have told.

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Frequently she walked from her lodgings to the tranquil Peabody graveyard to muse and silently weep. And the weeks slipped into months. Then one day Elizabeth wrote with chalk the letters E. W. before the door of the inn, but these were erased by some children playing there during the afternoon. At dusk a soldierly-looking man rode by, studied the door, and, failing to note the erased chalk-marks, passed on. As he turned a distant corner, Elizabeth caught sight of him, and, crying, "I am undone," fainted.

A few days later she died of consumption, into which she had lapsed after the birth of a dead child. When asked on her death-bed if her friends might not be sent for, she replied that she should soon go to them. Privately, however, she added to one who waited on her that her death was wisely ordered and was the easiest



THE TABLET OVER THE GRAVE OF ELIZABETH WHITMAN

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solution of many problems. She insisted that her wedding-ring be buried with her, and died expressing a living trust in God's love and mercy. It was only by a brief paragraph in the *Boston Chronicle* that her friends and family learned of her sad and obscure end.

Her funeral was the largest that had ever occurred in the town, the Danvers villagers turning out in great numbers for the ceremony. She was tenderly laid to rest in the beautiful burying-ground she had so often visited, and a few weeks after her death an unknown man erected over her grave a sandstone tablet bearing the inscription we have given. And year after year a mysterious lady and gentleman used to come regularly to Danvers, leave their horse at the tavern to be cared for, walk to the grave, stay there for awhile, return to the tavern to dine, and then go away

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as quietly and mysteriously as they had come. Every year at the same time they appeared, growing older and sadder each season till both were white-haired and bent. The villagers, though extremely curious about these sad pilgrims, never knew who they were, for they gave no name and no one thought of demanding one. Subsequently, however, it developed that they were Elizabeth's sister Abigail and that young brother of whom the dead woman had once written thus affectionately to Mr. Barlow:

“ Do you know, I think my brother improves greatly under your auspices? Let me bespeak your kind attention to him. Form his taste, if you can, to those things you yourself admire, to books and study. Besides, the improving of these afford rational amusement to the mind. These are safe pleasures; but, oh, what deceitful

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ones lurk in the world to catch the unwary! My poor boy will be particularly disposed to be led astray by these, unless his friends protect him. He is uncommonly influenced by the company he keeps." Surely no grown woman who would write in this noble strain of a young brother could herself have fallen into evil ways as do "the unwary." This "young brother" was known in his later years as an antiquarian, an habitu  of the Hartford Athen um. His sister's tragic death had sobered his gay spirits, for it dealt him a blow from which he could never recover. Abigail lived to extreme old age and never married.

All that is really known of Elizabeth Whitman's life has now been carefully told. But in the story, "Eliza Wharton; or, The Coquette," we have what has come to be regarded as her history. The book was published soon after the last act of the

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tragedy it is supposed to rehearse had been played out, and an utterly specious value given to its disclosures by the fact that it was written by the wife of Elizabeth's cousin. In the book *Elizabeth, or Eliza*, as we must now call her, is represented as a provincial belle, weary of the restraints of poverty and of the narrow parsonage life to which she had been born. After the death of her first lover, Mr. Howe, — which is made to follow that of her father, though it really preceded it, — she is sent to New Haven in search of gaiety and diversion. Here it is that she is made to meet for the first time "Major Sanford." He, the "villain" of the story, is readily recognized as Elizabeth Whitman's cousin, Pierrepont Edwards. What the scandal-mongering public, which seized eagerly upon countless editions of this crudely sensational novel, quite failed to realize as

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they read the story, was that Elizabeth had known her cousin as a family man ever since he was nineteen, — some eighteen years. So any such deception as the book elaborates would have been quite impossible.

In the story the heroine's inquiries into "Sanford's" habits and character pique him into a desire to work her undoing. He therefore makes desperate love to her, and in the midst of his courtship marries another woman for money, and, when married, moves into Eliza's neighbourhood for the express purpose of insulting her with his attentions.

"The Coquette" version has it that Eliza ultimately fell victim to the passion of this cousin, and so places upon the jealousy of Buckminster the worst possible construction. After her fiancé's surrender of her, Eliza is — in the novel — plunged

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into dejection and despair, and her letters — in the novel — are made to show her, at this time, full of terrible self-reproach. At that very moment, however, she was in reality cheerful and light-hearted, as we have seen from the correspondence with her friend Mr. Barlow.

As the day of her fatal departure draws near, the novel represents her confessing her guilt, confiding in her friend, and writing to her mother. But no confession passed her lips, and no confidence, of which we know, was ever given. Concerning her departure, too, the book is maliciously untruthful, for it represents her as carried away at night by her seducer, unknown to those who loved her, when, as a matter of fact, she went off in the regular stage-coach at high noon with everybody's warm approval.

This whole story might, indeed, have

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been written by a Boccaccio without genius, so sentimental, heated, and unsavoury is its general tone. The letters from the villain to the heroine whom he is tempting are modelled very closely upon those of Lovelace, and Buckminster (called "Mr. Boyer" in the book), the very last person on earth to delight in sentimental talk and to countenance the intrigues with which he is associated, is drawn an overbearing as well as an underbred prig.

Just here it is interesting to learn of the fashion in which this so-called "wronged lover" really received the book that would have defended him. An old lady, who was his parishioner in Portsmouth, is responsible for the statement that the minister would never allow anybody to blame Elizabeth Whitman in his presence. "I can tell you, too," she said once to Mrs. Dall, "what happened in this very

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room. Just after the book was published, Mr. Buckminster came to call on my mother. She was not quite ready to receive him, and probably forgot that a fresh copy of the novel, just arrived from Boston, lay upon the table.

“When she came down, she found the doctor thrusting something under the coals upon the hearth. As he turned round to greet her with flaming eyes, she saw some leather covers curling in the blaze. ‘Madam,’ said he, pointing to the spot, ‘there lies your book. It ought never to have been written, and it shall never be read, — at least, not in my parish. Bid the ladies take notice, wherever I find a copy I shall treat it in the same way,’ and so saying, he stalked out of the room.”

Elizabeth Whitman’s effects, carefully examined after her death, failed utterly to throw any light upon the unknown hus-

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band for whom she was supposed to be waiting in the old Bell Tavern. But this letter, written when she was near her end, gives us a hint of her distraught state of mind, in which, however, there was still womanly forgiveness. "Must I die alone? Shall I never see you more? I know that you will come, but you will come too late. This, I fear, is 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?"

Some verses, written about the same time, conclude with this quatrain, her swan-song:

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“ Oh, thou, for whose dear sake I bear
A doom so dreadful, so severe,
May happy fates thy footsteps guide,
And o'er thy peaceful home preside.”

Thus we leave the story of Elizabeth Whitman. Though many people have searched, none have been able to find — even in the course of a century during which hundreds of old attics have yielded up long-hidden secrets — any further papers bearing upon the facts of her strange fate. The identity of the unknown man still remains a haunting literary mystery. Many there are who say he was a nobleman, unwilling, after Elizabeth's death, to expose himself to bootless comment by stating the fact and manner of his clandestine marriage. For that there was a marriage all who have sympathetically explored the strange tale insist.

So to-day the lovers of Peabody plight

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their troth over the grave of this beautiful woman and swear to be faithful unto death even as she was. And on the stone so strangely put up to her there remains legible only this single last line:

“The tears of strangers watered her grave.”