

I. FOREWORD.

A SUMMONING OF THE TALE; TABULA PLENA; WHITHER WE TEND.

ABOUT the lives and the deaths of certain individuals there hangs a cloak of secrecy. May be they themselves are secretive, as strangers to their fellow human beings; may be the law that governs others cannot govern them, and they live by a light too subtle for color-soused eyes. One looks on them and would like to see something recognizable. *What caused this human being?* one asks oneself. *What brought this person to this end? What made them the person they are? What conditions, what causes, what conspiracy of society and economy?* And that sly craftsman, Complacency, shall find or invent responses to these questions, fashioning doubt to wont. We, however, who have thrown off of us at least the rule of this Complacency, must mistrust all these tidy explanations: must ask again—

Less than the times of Samuel Thornfield, we shall write his life, though the times will pursue us dog-like and nip at our heels and, certain it be, one day strike for the throat. We are not on indifferent terms with the times; only that the character about whom we write was such a man as would have shrugged off the very day, from some manner of instinct or urging or urgency. Samuel Thornfield was a man that merited the name. He was not a gentleman, no “nice” democrat nor humanist; and indeed, we do not go

far enough when we say only that. He shunned good manners. He was ruthless, no philanthropizer of his fellow human beings, no keeper of his brother. He was intollerent, insolent, impious; discriminating, commanding, imperious; supercilious, aristocratic even, supurb—oh, he had his virtues, let us be clear! But they were hard and lofty virtues such as do not commonly make a man beloved in our soft and kindly times.

He was, of course, child of those times, inasmuch as any one of us is. But he was more than that foe *of* and *to* the times, in a way that only an anachronism can be, or an earnest striver and innovator *in artis et philosophiis*. He was born direct of the taproot of an age, which so few of us even ever graze; and consequently was well-disposed to hack at all underpinnings and to suffer of the very bifurcations he himself had wrought. He was such as would have raged against the gods, did they still live; such as would have thrown his wrecking ball at the foundations of churches; such as would have unified a living aristocracy or trampled over a dying one to make his road; such as would have burned the world to lay bare its structure. Not for nothing was he a pupil of Napoleon and the Borgia, a qualified admirer of Bruno, an avid student of Machiavelli's *Principe*, a respectful (if utterly skeptical) scholar of alchemy and astrology, a sometime defender of notorious tyrants, lunatics, and heresiarchs. At his most most innocent and innocuous he was ever the prankster. At his worst—

And so it may be queried why at all we choose to represent this man's history to the public eye, or why in the devil's name we have determined Samuel Thornfield's errancies to be a fine topic for the general consumption. Well enough, gentle reader, do you propose such questions as these—and yet we must defer the answering, for at this all-consuming present, locus of our very lives, our defense should seem petty and inadequate and arbitrary indeed. But we may at least note *this*: Samuel Thornfield was a man of uncommon high intelligence. And if there be at least a morsel of interest which resides in the contemplation of human beings of mental excellence, then let us be forgiven, at least so far as our initial cast, the figuring of this man and his destiny.

PART ONE

Now, just what is a man to do with his mind, when he is given one worthy of the use? Particularly as, in case we have not said it already, Samuel Thornfield was born no scientist nor analyst nor merchant, but rather an *artist*; was born with a special tendency and affinity for *writing* in particular, which matured in him with the most elevated standards and a natural excellence of taste, and drew the better part of the arc of his life. Trouble, that spells to one who knows. What will a man like this do in our sad day? Where will he turn, when it seems that all the roads of art lead only into each other, and all mines of this very rich earth are already exhausted and its golden core hollowed out, and nothing left new beneath this sun?

Well did Samuel Thornfield himself confront that "crisis of the arts" of which so many speak so ingenuously, and so few so genuinely; confronted the exhaustion of the arts in general, and of the novel in particular. His peers of the pen, or those of them who were not glib of the state of affairs, must surely have asked themselves whither they were tending—and stuttered before the response. He asked himself this question, to be sure, and more than a single time. He found in the novel the highest form of human criticism; he pressed that conviction to its uttermost. Perchance he never trespassed beyond. Late on, after the trouble had come, been, expended itself so terribly on him, he wrote in one of his better celebrated essays that his was a time "in which the conditions for creative work are almost utterly expended." Let us heed that "almost"! So much may yet germinate within that almost! Our protagonist's entire life right until the breaking point unfolded within that "almost." That is ominous, to be sure, and nigh awakes the very darkness itself: we speak of a man who sought out a solution to this crisis along the course of his very life—and came at last, upon the cusp of some desperate night, to an answer by no means new, but old, so very old, archaic almost in its oldness—

But we postpone these maleficent revelations. Much sand must slip the shank of the hourglass ere our time is ripe. Mayhaps it shall be inferred already whither we are tending. This quest, the novelist's quest, seems ever to finish from whatever beginning at the same end, no matter what turnings and twistings it might in the mean-

THORNTREE

time risk. Well, kind reader—here we stand once more, as it were for the thousandth time—the *thousandth*, and the *first*. Here is our boy, our “hero” even now, born “innocent” upon the stage. And we shall duly follow him, ’til he, crushed in the wreck of his day, does blubber and gasp from out the gathering tide, grasping at an aid to his faltering: any aid at all, even the darkest, the most subtle, the most sinister: even that which would demand of him—nothing less than his very soul—

II. ORIGINS.

THE SOIL; THE SEED; THE SPROUT.

The persons responsible for Samuel Thornfield's conception, birth, and upbringing, would perhaps best be described as normal, decent, upstanding, well-meaning folk—the sort of parents that both bless a child and in their own inadvertent way may curse it.

Sara, Samuel's mother, spent the better part of her life in the town of her birth, Silverspur, where Samuel in his turn was to spend the better part of his own. Her grandparents had immigrated from Germany during the gold rush, a family of day-workers seeking better fortune in the New World—had struggled their way toward the Western fringes of the still-green country—had found their way to Silverspur, where Sara's grandfather worked the very mine he died in. His tombstone, which Sara brought her son once to see, was still up in the old Silverspur graveyard, posed like some kind of modest monument to that place's history—a worn tombstone with his name tantalizingly faint upon it, and the dates carved in mysterious centrality: below, *May 9, 1924*, and above it, *September 25, 1892*. He had lived a brief furious life, and had done well for himself, having amassed a tidy sum of money for his four children to squander. The most honest of these four was William Brinkerhoff, Sara's father, who employed his portion of his inheritance in opening a humble but well-reputed hardware store.

Sara was born as American as any other third-generation child; never knew a word of German and never would have seen profit in the learning. She was pale with quiet green eyes, freckled 'til the day she died, and had blonde hair which verged lightly toward strawberry, becoming, as she aged, unattractively thin and orange. Her mouth seemed too small, or her teeth too large, and the perfectly straight curve of her lips seemed more wont to frown than to smile. Her nose was flat and round somehow, as though it had been eroded away by years of wind and rain. She was a plain creature, but with a quiet prettiness about her. She became an accountant early on, and kept with this unglamorous profession steadfastly until her death, being of the opinion, inherited no doubt from the generations, that any work was better than none, and that to malingering and asperse one's low destiny was but to court hardship.

Samuel's father, Cody Thornfield, was descended of English settlers, from the blood of the first colonizers of a new continent. His ancestor Thomas Thornfield was amongst the crew that accompanied John White himself to the New World and came thence to found the hapless colony of Roanoke. Thomas departed with White on his emergency return to England, and thus was spared the mysterious fate of his remnant brethren. He was at White's side as, upon their second visitation of this wild new world, they stood before the voided encampment, the motiveless vanishing of some one-hundred fifteen souls, and gazed uncomprehending on that password chiseled enigmatic upon its tree, *CROATOAN*. As if he had been welded to this new country by that tragedy itself, Thomas never returned to England save once, to fetch his wife and his children and to bring them thence to that perilous frontier. Thus the seed was cast to America.

To Cody Thornfield, of course, this history was as lost to memory as the fate of the Lost Colony itself. So far as he knew or cared, the Thornfields were sprung up alfalfa-like from the soil of the Northwest. He was of stolidly American deportment, sturdy and muscular, strong of his bearded jaw, prominent of nose and narrow of eye as though the sun had molded his face to the exigencies of its greater brightness. He carried with him that strange mix of rugged seriousness

PART ONE

and childish glee that once characterized the men of the Westward stab. He was American to the very roots. He had been for the early part of his life a truck driver; but after meeting Sara and asking for her hand, he settled into construction, logging, day-laboring, carpentry, and whatever simple, earthy professions he could find to pass his strength into money and his money into living. It happened that he possessed a special skill and almost an instinct for any work involving the use of his body as a tool, and it was not long before he was able to leave the cruder labors behind, and adapt himself entirely to those he best enjoyed—carpentry and metalworking and the engineering of simple machines.

Thus Samuel Thornfield was born exhaustively American—and what does that mean, but that his heritage was swallowed by the land, and so rendered meaningless? His ancestors were primarily of such and such a blood, but whatever these designations might have signified to the old world, to the new they were only the echoes of a dead past, like those weathered, almost effaced names of distant dead relatives on their tombstones, or the worn relics that one keeps on one's mantel, not out of reverence for antiquity, but merely out of habit, and because it would be unseemly to sell such trinkets or give them away.

Both Samuel's parents were quiet, gentle creatures. We shall not say reclusive, for what that word must come to signify in the harrowed life of their son; but they were, nonetheless, of a retiring sort, and did not mind going long spells without seeing their fellow human beings. They were never known to quarrel, save now and then softly and somehow without ire. They gave themselves to no religion, but both in some indistinct way believed in God. They loved the earth (or as much as they understood of it), they mistrusted all things new, and they appreciated and needed each other long after they had ceased to adore each other, which bond was only strengthened as the troubles later began to accrue about their only son.

They had met in a mundane and totally characteristic fashion, starting up a conversation in a tiny local store over some locally hand-woven wool blankets they had come to buy before the harsh northern winter fell down. The one abnormal quality of their

meeting was the rapidity with which they realized the promise between them, and how quickly they discovered that so many wool blankets would be quite superfluous that winter: for they had found a better source of warmth. From then on, they unstintingly gave themselves each to the other in support and tenderness, with all the slender gifts they could find to give; and each was ever a strong staff for the other to lean upon. As the years passed, they grew into each other like two old trees grown close for very long.

It is much to their credit that the decision to bring Samuel into this world was no accidental one, no result of a mere flurry of lust and heat. Their simple souls were touched by the notion of their union in a third; they wanted a companion to whom they might teach the beauty of the earth as they superficially but powerfully felt it—a child whom they might raise into an upright, strong, compassionate human; a child better than its parents. From the first, Samuel was conceived without either of the two bitterest thorns of conception—envy and resentment. His parents joined together with an ideal clinging between them; and thus they tilled the soil and made it ready.

Samuel's mother sometimes said of him that she knew the baby was special long before he parted her womb; that she could feel his character already, the sort of child he was to be, even the sort of man he was to become. We must also credit her then with a sense of foreboding, of which she spoke nothing at the time. We may ask, in light of Sara Thornfield's peculiar claims, if it really is so—if the man really was somehow contained already in the child, quite before he had even found his swaddling clothes—if there is something accurate in speaking of "Samuel Thornfield" before his birth, and before circumstance and environment could begin to craft their working pressures to his form—if there is a continuity to the soul and to its development which begins as far back as the sowing of seed in seed—if we each bear upon us, in some secret fashion, the mark of our own characteristic fate... No one will go so far as to claim that the man was there, perfect within the child. There were too many forking paths beyond infancy—too many possibilities, events, accidents, happinesses, disappointments, errancies. But were

PART ONE

not the contours of the future there, if not the fleshy reality? Does it not seem right to say that the unborn child, like the encampment that forms one day the nation, like the seed that yields one day the tree, contains every one of his possible futures already within him, if not the decision of which future is really to be his? Samuel the babe was not Samuel the man; but was he not a bridge from there to here?

But these are questions only, though likely unavoidable ones in the contemplation of a life like Samuel's. They are indeed perchance the very pith of the matter. It is better we broach them now, even to the distraction of our narrative, than leave them to foment darkly beneath the stream. Yet far be it that we already pretend to their answers! Even come the end of all, when we have witnessed the whole river flow by, and watched the child pass to man and the man once more to child—even then, perhaps, such answers will elude us.

But let it be said, contrary the science of our day, contrary our nice ingenuity and optimism: a question that has no answer does not perforce cease to be a question; and an unanswerable question does not perforce cease to be portentous.

We may also remark that Samuel was born into this world in its gentlest season, when all was balm and honey, and the contentment of the living was only the better displayed through the triviality of its plaints; and if Samuel's protestation seemed louder at his entry than any other babe born in that region on that hour, it can have had nothing to do with the weather. The day was fine, clear, and pleasant, the sky serene; and even the billowy clouds that idled along under their divine manikin threads were far less a threat to that serenity than its accent. I should like to report that some sign or signal in the natural world marked Samuel's arrival, some augur, as it were, either above or below—but that would be a mere fabrication on my part, totally unjustified by what was, after all, a finally prosaic event.

A tiny life pressed and pulled jarringly into the cold artificial hospital lights; a birth neither easy nor hard; no undue complications, no unexpected dangers, no trials apart from the commonplace and anticipated. Who, disconnected from these events, would feel toward them aught but indifference? Never, after all, has human life been so plentiful as it is today; and so never has the single human

THORNTREE

been smaller and more insignificant. Indeed, what is one more in an equation that takes as its smallest unit the hundred—and still considers this but a tiny fraction of the true unit?

Yet thus it was on that 15th day of September, *Anno Domini* 1984. A private joy and a public inconsequence; a mere daily event amongst a great surging throng of daily events: a totally inauspicious birth.

III. INFANCY.

SECRECY; A RING;
LAUGHTER OF THE CRADLE AND LAUGHTER OF SOLITUDE;
THE IMP AND THE ANGEL.

WE are begun strangely—are we not? One writes of a human being, precisely as he differs from his fellows, and therefore is worthy of notice in one way or another—because he is a personality or a character or a destiny, or because he has been divided out by some tragic or some comic happenstance. One writes even of commonplace lives only so as to make them appear wonderful and strange—to recreate them to tired accustomed eyes. We instead have commenced by insisting on the regularity of our protagonist's very introduction into this world. But in this we are merely heeding good counsel; for in the desire to differentiate one human from another, we are often induced to service lies, precisely to protect his individuality and his integer novelty. We do not mean to diminish Samuel Thornfield's singularity, but only to establish its antecedents. For the rebellion against normalcy is destined to be a part of the hidden life history of many an aspiring soul in our day; and in this, Samuel, in his violent youth, was very far from being an exception.

There were, however, differences enough between our protagonist and his contemporaries—differences evident as early as his infancy and juvenescence. Now this period of a person's life is a difficult time for his chronicler, so crucial is it for his growth and

development, so overflowing in wonders and essential events—and all of it totally inaccessible, not only to the dispassionate observer, but even to the person himself when he has outgrown it. To neglect this epoch in Samuel's life would be irresponsible and must result in ignorance; but to speak of it at all is to speak incompletely at best, like a writer who labors in a language he commands but halfway.

What are we to say of Samuel's earliest years? There were, as we have suggested, oddities to that time, and perhaps they may serve us as secret and obscured windows into the essence of matters. For one thing, there was the child's striking tendency to stare, even as far back as when he was a baby—at people, at objects, at events, for time longer than was sometimes comfortable, with his eyes intense and troubled, his lips firm compressed, like he were stranger to his surroundings and seeking to comprehend everything for the first time. Babies often will stare, and often enough will inflame the vanity of the observed. But let it speak to the strangeness of Samuel's gaze even in his earliest days that his uncle, Mortimer Brinkerhoff, brother of his mother, was disquieted by the baby's attentions. He never mentioned this fact to his gentle sister, of course; but we find in his journal, dated before Samuel's second birthday, unhappy reference to the child's eyes, which Mortimer went so far as describing as "unnatural"—though he hastened to strike out this surprising word and replace it with the much softer and more ambiguous and altogether more democratic "unusual."

Another trait of the infant we may note was a strange propensity, from a very early age, toward secrecy. He was found one day when he was but three, out in the yard bestride his house, with something wrapped tight in his little curled fist. His mother bid him give the object over, but he refused with a tenacity that she found unexpected and troubling. She tried to force from him whatever he was gripping—he reacted with a strange vehemence—his father with his strong working hands was summoned—and the object was forcibly brought out at last. 'twas a tiny bejeweled ring, silver and slender of band, crowned with seven sapphire-blue stones and a large, deep amethyst. It had evidently been lost into the lawn from the finger of an unfortunate guest—or perhaps drawn thence by the

PART ONE

force of the child's person, as these talisman sometimes disquietingly are—or perhaps long left behind by the home's old indweller.

When his little treasure had been subtracted from him, the boy became sullen and dour and would not speak a word for some days. His parents, to whom such behavior would have been foreign even in an adult, much less in their own son, were totally bemused by the event and tried to pass it off merely as an idiosyncrasy in Samuel's young life, such as children sometimes try like a new toy, immediately to discard. How could they know that they were confronted with something that rooted deep in the child and was not to be disregarded? Indeed, it speaks to the strength of the thing that this very ring, which they later gave to Samuel as a sort of heirloom, and which he in a moment of boyish affection gave to his mother to wear proudly evermore on the ring-finger of her right hand, was to make a startling impromptu reappearance, was destined to play a central role in his life many, many years later, when he chose his way, and made a thrust as though to throw his tragedy from his shoulders—

But all things to their rightful place. Suffice it to say, Samuel's parents were to encounter similar tendency in their child again and again. On subsequent events, when he took silently to hording bits of detritus he had collected from around the neighborhood, or to hiding his childhood books so that his guests could not read them, or even as late as middle school to stealing fragments of his peers' writings and notebooks (and in one case a little girl's entire diary)—on such subsequent events, Samuel's parents, fearing what these deeds signified for their boy's morality, reprimanded and punished him in their mild but firm way. He always bore such consequences stoically and without complaint or rejoinder, but also darkly, as though some injustice were being perpetrated against him. And once more, we must give his parents credit; for by their efforts, the danger was perhaps averted that these tendencies might have developed into a base greed and a selfish lust and avarice for mere things and objects, coupled with the desire to own such things and objects oneself, totally and tyrannically oneself. His parents made his urges an item of his shame—which is not at all to say that they

eradicated these urges from his breast! For the well-springs of certain compulsions lie too deep ever to be eradicated, and can only, like geysers, be stopped up at the surface, and thereby redirected.

If we have given the impression in all this that Samuel was uncommonly serious, or was a stranger to boyish exuberance, humor, and pranksterism, then we have badly wrought our portrait. If anything, he was more prone to laughter than most young boys. But even this seemed to grow akimbo in him, as if even his more regular traits were destined to fall through the bending power of his character, like a ray of light through a lens. For as he grew older, and found himself more and more in company of the solitude, his laughter became his own private thing, and it would not at all be rare to find the boy chuckling to himself over some hidden delight or joke. This is perhaps usual in the child, whose laughter is not always connected to humor as an adult will understand it, but more often to simple, innocent, burbling, overflowing joy at the wonders of existence, that capricious child-mirth at which the grown person, in turn, often wonders, and which he is sometimes wont to try to recapture—such may be the vanity of our human endeavor. But in the normal course of things, as the babe grows and begins the long, almost never completed, often self-sabotaged process of arighting its dependency on other human beings, so it begins to awaken to its social self, and its laughter becomes more and more a tool of expression, a tool of communication, and a bond between the “self” and its fellows, a primitive and thus nigh adamantine chain wrought between it and its new society. In the awakening of this new laughter, humor comes to take its right role; and gradually, the laughter of awe and wonder is forgotten and replaced with the laughter of joke, jest, and mockery.

Samuel never abandoned the laughter of his cradle, as indeed many of us do not altogether, and his laughter was often tied with amazement. In some way he clung to that state of being with a determination and a capability that most of us lack. But more strikingly, Samuel’s humor became a thing disquietingly his own, and his laughter was almost uniformly the laughter of his solitude. Indeed, for a time, it seemed that he had sunk the claws of his incom-

PART ONE

prehensible secrecy into his laughter, had made it a thing the fount of which he loathed to share—as if laughter shared should be laughter diminished, like a bright new coin passed to grubby hands. It even reached the point for a time that when asked why he laughed he would at once fall silent and serious, might pretend he had not laughed at all, and would go about his play or his exploration with a sudden and untoward intensity. Even long after he learned to laugh with others, one always had the suspicion that, when Samuel laughed, he laughed somehow individually and apart; that there was not only amazement to be found in his laughter, but also contempt; and that no matter to what chorus of hilarity he indulged in others—he laughed only *to* himself, and *at* the world...

But let us interrupt ourselves, let us step back, lest we, in our attempt to delve into the child's depths, neglect his surface and its effervescent winsomeness. We must stress that these were only Samuel's peculiarities and excesses, and not at all the traits that most commonly governed his personality. He was, in fact, rightly much adored by those around him, be they relatives or friends of family; and it is possible that even his peers, insofar as they would not befriend him, were but suffering from the first pangs of that envy and discomfort at strangeness which stand above the strings of so many human actions. Envy and malcomprehension, indeed, were always to leave their shadowy traces on the borders of Samuel's existence—even when he proudly refused to acknowledge them.

Should the farce not then have started early? For he was a beautiful boy, already with his dark curls of hair and his large green questing eyes and his bow-shaped lips, like some strange dark little angel; and he was already different enough from his fellows, even in appearance, that it is no wonder that they mistrusted him from the first—sometimes for the very same reasons that adults so loved him. He was full of life, vibrancy, and curiosity, and if he would not laugh in company, he seemed nonetheless delighted in making his company laugh. With his triangular face and bright smile, with his glittering glance and his strong, puckish eyebrows, what adult could have resisted his bewitchment? Like the hybrid of an imp and a cherub, he was. What adult would not be willing to forgive even his

oddest habits and idiosyncrasies—which after all, mean far less to the average adult than do a child's commoner deeds and his more quotidian and more public demeanor? When he smiled, his watchers laughed; when he played, they played with him in their hearts; and indeed, so great was his charisma even as a toddler, that when he was in the company of adoring adults, there were no longer observers, but only participants in the stories that he wove around himself.

The stories! Oh, he was a child of stories from the very first, a boy of tales and even of lies, a creature made up. And what stories would he tell to his enchanted listeners, these adults—what stories for his aunts and uncles, his parents and their friends! And he there before them, in the living room, perchance, on the thick soft carpet, flashing his white teeth and putting on theater for whomever would be his audience. And they, delighted or appalled, as his tale would have them, watching him, his mother's hands before her lips and her eyes proud crescents, her small straight lips smiling with that semblance they had of pain at smiling, his father with his arms crossed and laughing like a fool, and glancing now and then at the others, to delight the more in *their* delight of his son. And all eyes rapt on little Samuel marching there across the floor, with all the accoutrements and all the costume of his imagination in tow; little Samuel already a being of masks and a dozen faces, putting on one and sloughing off the other with remarkable ease; little Samuel who would have no truck with the world as it stood, for the potency of his mind, and who therefore and for that reason—*enthralled*...

Thus it was in the presence of the boy. There was something charmed about the world when he was in it; his wide-eyed wonder was infectious, his energy, catching; his movements were so beautifully frank. All seemed promise before him, as though life were but a flowing carpet unrolled in a straight line toward some unknown but splendid goal. In the promise of a child like Samuel, one is tempted to feel that everything has a sense and a right order after all; that the future is no diminution of the present, but rather its crown; that humankind is still on the ascending path, and that life itself is surging upward upon the breath of benevolent powers...

Alas, alas, for the frail simplicity of our hopes!