

# Fragments From the Journal of a Solitary Man

By Nathaniel Hawthorne

My poor friend "Oberon"—for let me be allowed to distinguish him by so quaint a name—sleeps with the silent of ages. He died calmly. Though his disease was pulmonary, his life did not flicker out like a wasted lamp, sometimes shooting up into a strange temporary brightness; but the tide of being ebbd away, and the moon of his existence waned till, in the simple phraseology of Scripture, "he was not." The last words he said to me were, "Burn my papers—all that you can find in yonder escritoire; for I fear there are some there which you may be betrayed into publishing. I have published enough; as for the old disconnected journal in your possession." But here my poor friend was checked in his utterance by that same hollow cough which would never let him alone. So he coughed himself tired, and sunk to slumber. I watched from that midnight hour till high noon on the morrow for his waking. The chamber was dark; till, longing for light, I opened the window-shutter, and the broad day looked in on the marble features of the dead!

I religiously obeyed his instructions with regard to the papers in the escritoire, and burned them in a heap without looking into one, though sorely tempted. But the old journal I kept. Perhaps in strict conscience I ought also to have burned that; but, casting my eye over some half-torn leaves the other day, I could not resist an impulse to give some fragments of it to the public. To do this satisfactorily, I am obliged to twist this thread, so as to string together into a semblance of order my Oberon's "random pearls."

If any body that holds any commerce with his fellow-men can be called solitary, Oberon was a "solitary man." He lived in a small village at some distance from the metropolis, and never came up to the city except once in three months for the purpose of looking into a book-store, and of spending two hours and a half with me. In that space of time I would tell him all that I could remember of interest which had occurred in the interim of his visits. He would join very heartily in the conversation; but as soon as the time of his usual tarrying had elapsed, he would take up his hat and depart. He was unequivocally the most original person I ever knew. His style of composition was very charming. No tales that have ever appeared in our popular journals have been so generally admired as his. But a sadness was on his spirit; and this, added to the shrinking sensitiveness of his nature, rendered him not misanthropic, but singularly averse to social intercourse. Of the disease, which was slowly sapping the springs of his life, he first became fully conscious after one of those long abstractions in which he was so wont to indulge. It is remarkable, however, that his first idea of this sort, instead of deepening his spirit with a more melancholy hue, restored him to a more natural state of mind.

He had evidently cherished a secret hope that some impulse would at length be given him, or that he would muster sufficient energy of will to return into the world, and act a wiser and happier part than his former one. But life never called the dreamer forth; it was Death that whispered him. It is to be regretted that this portion of his old journal contains so few passages relative to this interesting period; since the little which he has recorded, though melancholy enough, breathes the gentleness of a spirit newly restored to communion with its kind. If there be any thing bitter in the following reflections, its source is in human sympathy, and its sole object is himself.

“It is hard to die without one’s happiness; to none more so than myself, whose early resolution it had been to partake largely of the joys of life, but never to be burthened with its cares. Vain philosophy! The very hardships of the poorest laborer, whose whole existence seems one long toil, has something preferable to my best pleasures.

Merely skimming the surface of life, I know nothing, by my own experience, of its deep and warm realities. I have achieved none of those objects which the instinct of mankind especially prompts them to pursue, and the accomplishment of which must therefore beget a native satisfaction. The truly wise, after all their speculations, will be led into the common path, and, in homage to the human nature that pervades them, will gather gold, and till the earth, and set out trees, and build a house. But I have scorned such wisdom. I have rejected, also, the settled, sober, careful gladness of a man by his own fireside, with those around him whose welfare is committed to his trust and their guidance to his fond authority. Without influence among serious affairs, my footsteps were not imprinted on the earth, but lost in air; and I shall leave no son to inherit my share of life, with a better sense of its privileges and duties, when his father should vanish like a bubble; so that few mortals, even the humblest and the weakest, have been such ineffectual shadows in the world, or die so utterly as I must. Even a young man’s bliss has not been mine. With a thousand vagrant fantasies, I have never truly loved, and perhaps shall be doomed to loneliness throughout the eternal future, because, here on earth, my soul has never married itself to the soul of woman.

Such are the repinings of one who feels, too late, that the sympathies of his nature have avenged themselves upon him. They have frustrated, with a joyless life and the prospect of a reluctant death, my selfish purpose to keep aloof from mortal disquietudes, and be a pleasant idler among care-stricken and laborious men. I have other regrets, too, savoring more of my old spirit. The time has been when I meant to visit every region of the earth, except the Poles and central Africa. I had a strange longing to see the Pyramids. To Persia and Arabia, and all the gorgeous East, I owed a pilgrimage for the sake of their magic tales. And England, the land of my ancestors! Once I had fancied that my sleep would not be quiet in the grave unless I should return, as it were, to my home of past ages, and see the very cities, and castles, and battle-fields of history, and stand within the holy gloom of its cathedrals, and kneel at the shrines of its immortal poets, there asserting myself their hereditary countryman. This feeling lay among the deepest in my heart. Yet, with this homesickness for the father-land, and all these plans of remote travel,—ivhich I yet believe that my peculiar instinct impelled me to form, and upbraided me for not accomplishing— the utmost limit of my wanderings has been little more than six hundred miles from my native village. Thus, in whatever way I consider my life, or what must be termed such, I cannot feel as if I have lived at all.

I am possessed, also, with the thought that I have never yet discovered the real secret of my powers; that there has been a mighty treasure within my reach, a mine of gold beneath my feet, worthless because I have never known how to seek for it; and for want of perhaps one fortunate idea, I am to die

‘Unwept, unhonored, and unsung.

Once, amid the troubled and tumultuous enjoyment of my life, there was one dreary thought that haunted me,—the terrible necessity imposed on mortals to grow old or die. I could not bear the idea of losing one youthful grace. True: I saw other men, who had once been young and now were old, enduring their age with equanimity, because each year reconciled them to its own

added weight. But for myself, I felt that age would be not less miserable, creeping upon me slowly, than if it fell at once. I sometimes looked in the glass, and endeavored to fancy my cheeks yellow and interlaced with furrows, my forehead wrinkled deeply across, the top of my head bald and polished, my eye-brows and side-locks iron-gray, and a grisly beard sprouting on my chin. Shuddering at the picture, I changed it for the dead face of a young man, with dark locks clustering heavily round its pale beauty, which would decay, indeed, but not with years, nor in the sight of men. The latter visage shocked me least.

Such a repugnance to the hard conditions of long life is common to all sensitive and thoughtful men, who minister to the luxury, the refinements, the gaiety and lightsomeness, to any thing, in short, but the real necessities of their fellow-creatures. He who has a part in the serious business of life, though it be only as a shoemaker, feels himself equally respectable in youth and age, and therefore is content to live, and look forward to wrinkles and decrepitude in their due season. It is far otherwise with the busy idlers of the world. I was particularly liable to this torment, being a meditative person in spite of my levity. The truth could not be concealed, nor the contemplation of it avoided. With deep inquietude I became aware that what was graceful now, and seemed appropriate enough to my age of flowers, would be ridiculous in middle life; and that the world, so indulgent to the fantastic youth, would scorn the bearded man, still telling love-tales, loftily ambitious of a maiden's tear, and squeezing out, as it were, with his brawny strength, the essence of roses. And in his old age the sweet lyrics of Anacreon made the girls laugh at his white hairs the more. With such sentiments, conscious that my part in the drama of life was fit only for a youthful performer, I nourished a regretful desire to be summoned early from the scene. I set a limit to myself, the age of twenty-five, few years indeed, but too many to be thrown away. Scarcely had I thus fixed the term of my mortal pilgrimage, than the thought grew into a presentiment that, when the space should be completed, the world would have one butterfly the less, by my far flight.

Oh, how fond I was of life, even while allotting, as my proper destiny, an early death! I loved the world, its cities, its villages, its grassy roadsides, its wild forests, its quiet scenes, its gay, warm, enlivening bustle; in every aspect, I loved the world so long as I could behold it with young eyes and dance through it with a young heart. The earth had been made so beautiful, that I longed for no brighter sphere, but only an ever youthful eternity in this. I clung to earth as if my beginning and ending were to be there, unable to imagine any but an earthly happiness, and choosing such, with all its imperfections, rather than perfect bliss which might be alien from it. Alas! I had not yet known that weariness by which the soul proves itself ethereal."

Turning over the old journal, I open, by chance, upon a passage which affords a signal instance of the morbid fancies to which Oberon frequently yielded himself. Dreams like the following were probably engendered by the deep gloom sometimes thrown over his mind by his reflections on death.

"I dreamed that one bright forenoon I was walking through Broadway, and seeking to cheer myself with the warm and busy life of that far-famed promenade. Here a coach thundered over the pavement, and there an unwieldy omnibus, with spruce gigs rattling past, and horsemen prancing through all the bustle. On the side-walk people were looking at the rich display of goods, the plate and jewelry, or the latest caricature in the booksellers' windows; while fair ladies and whiskered gentlemen tripped gaily along, nodding mutual recognitions, or shrinking from some rough countryman or sturdy laborer whose contact might have ruffled their finery. I

found myself in this animated scene, with a dim and misty idea that it was not my proper place, or that I had ventured into the crowd with some singularity of dress or aspect which made me ridiculous. Walking in the sunshine, I was yet cold as death. By degrees, too, I perceived myself the object of universal attention, and, as it seemed, of horror and affright. Every face grew pale; the laugh was hushed, and the voices died away in broken syllables; the people in the shops crowded to the doors with a ghastly stare, and the passengers on all sides fled as from an embodied pestilence. The horses reared and snorted. An old beggar woman sat before St. Paul's church, with her withered palm stretched out to all, but drew it back from me, and pointed to the graves and monuments in that populous church-yard. Three lovely girls, whom I had formerly known, ran shrieking across the street. A personage in black, whom I was about to overtake, suddenly turned his head, and showed the features of a long-lost friend. He gave me a look of horror and was gone.

I passed not one step further, but threw my eyes on a looking-glass which stood deep within the nearest shop. At the first glimpse of my own figure I awoke, with a horrible sensation of self-terror and self-loathing. No wonder that the affrighted city fled! I had been promenading Broadway in my shroud!"

I should be doing injustice to my friend's memory, were I to publish other extracts even nearer to insanity than this, from the scarcely legible papers before me. I gather from them,—for I do not remember that he ever related to me the circumstances,—that he once made a journey, chiefly on foot, to Niagara. Some conduct of the friends among whom he resided in his native village was construed by him into oppression. These were the friends to whose care he had been committed by his parents, who died when Oberon was about twelve years of age. Though he had always been treated by them with the most uniform kindness, and though a favourite among the people of the village rather on account of the sympathy which they felt in his situation than from any merit of his own, such was the waywardness of his temper, that on a slight provocation he ran away from the home that sheltered him, expressing openly his determination to die sooner than return to the detested spot. A severe illness overtook him after he had been absent about four months. While ill, he felt how unsoothing were the kindest looks and tones of strangers. He rose from his sick bed a better man, and determined upon a speedy self-atonement by returning to his native town. There he lived, solitary and sad, but forgiven and cherished by his friends till the day he died. That part of the journal which contained a description of this journey is mostly destroyed. Here and there is a fragment. I cannot select, for the pages are very scanty; but I do not withhold the following fragments, because they indicate a better and more cheerful frame of mind than the foregoing.

"On reaching the ferry-house, a rude structure of boards at the foot of the cliff, I found several of these wretches devoid of poetry, and lost some of my own poetry by contact with them. The hut was crowded by a party of provincials—a simple and merry set, who had spent the afternoon fishing near the Falls, and were bartering black and white bass and eels for the ferryman's whiskey. A greyhound and three spaniels, brutes of much more grace and decorous demeanor than their masters, sat at the door. A few yards off, yet wholly unnoticed by the dogs, was a beautiful fox, whose countenance betokened all the sagacity attributed to him in ancient fable. He had a comfortable bed of straw in an old barrel, whither he retreated, flourishing his bushy tail as I made a step towards him, but soon came forth and surveyed me with a keen and intelligent eye. The Canadians bartered their fish and drank their whiskey, and were loquacious

on trifling subjects, and merry at simple jests, with as little regard to the scenery as they could have shown to the flattest part of the Grand Canal. Nor was I entitled to despise them; for I amused myself with all those foolish matters of fishermen, and dogs, and fox, just as if Sublimity and Beauty were not married at that place and moment; as if their nuptial band were not the brightest of all rainbows on the opposite shore; as if the gray precipice were not frowning above my head and Niagara thundering around me.

The grim ferryman, a black-whiskered giant, half drunk withal, now thrust the Canadians by main force out of his door, launched a boat, and bade me sit down in the stern-sheets. Where we crossed, the river was white with foam, yet did not offer much resistance to a straight passage, which brought us close to the outer edge of the American falls. The rainbow vanished as we neared its misty base, and when I leaped ashore, the sun had left all Niagara in shadow.”

“A sound of merriment, sweet voices and girlish laughter, came dancing through the solemn roar of waters. In old times, when the French and afterwards the English, held garrisons near Niagara, it used to be deemed a feat worthy of a soldier, a frontier man, or an Indian, to cross the rapids to Goat Island. As the country became less rude and warlike, a long space intervened, in which it was but half believed, by a faint and doubtful tradition, that mortal foot had ever trod this wild spot of precipice and forest clinging between two cataracts. The island is no longer a tangled forest, but a grove of stately trees, with grassy intervals about their roots and woodland paths among their trunks. There was neither soldier nor Indian here now, but a vision of three lovely girls, running brief races through the broken sunshine of the grove, hiding behind the trees, and pelting each other with the cones of the pine. When their sport had brought them near me, it so happened that one of the party ran up and shook me by the hand—a greeting which I heartily returned, and would have done the same had it been tenderer. I had known this wild little black-eyed lass in my youth and her childhood, before I had commenced my rambles.

We met on terms of freedom and kindness, which elder ladies might have thought unsuitable with a gentleman of my description. When I alluded to the two fair strangers, she shouted after them by their Christian names, at which summons, with grave dignity, they drew near, and honored me with a distant curtsy. They were from the upper part of Vermont. Whether sisters, or cousins, or at all related to each other, I cannot tell; but they are planted in my memory like ‘two twin roses on one stem,’ with the fresh dew in both their bosoms; and when I would have pure and pleasant thoughts, I think of them. Neither of them could have seen seventeen years. They both were of a height, and that a moderate one. The rose-bloom of their cheeks could hardly be called bright in her who was the rosiest, nor faint, though a shade less deep, in her companion. Both had delicate eye-brows, not strongly defined, yet somewhat darker than their hair; both had small sweet mouths, maiden mouths, of not so warm and deep a tint as ruby, but only red as the reddest rose; each had those gems, the rarest, the most precious, a pair of clear, soft, bright blue eyes. Their style of dress was similar; one had on a black silk gown, with a stomacher of velvet, and scalloped cuffs of the same from the wrist to the elbow; the other wore cuffs and stomacher of the like pattern and material, over a gown of crimson silk. The dress was rather heavy for their slight figures, but suited to September. They and the darker beauty all carried their straw bonnets in their hands.”

I cannot better conclude these fragments than with poor Oberon’s description of his return to his native village after his slow recovery from his illness. How beautifully does he express his penitential emotions! A beautiful moral may be indeed drawn from the early death of a sensitive

recluse, who had shunned the ordinary avenues to distinction, and with splendid abilities sank into an early grave, almost unknown to mankind, and without any record save what my pen hastily leaves upon these tear-blotted pages.

## MY HOME RETURN

“When the stage-coach had gained the summit of the hill, I alighted to perform the small remainder of my journey on foot. There had not been a more delicious afternoon than this, in all the train of summer—the air being a sunny perfume, made up of balm, and warmth, and gentle brightness. The oak and walnut-trees, over my head, retained their deep masses of foliage, and the grass, though for months the pasturage of stray cattle, had been revived with the freshness of early June, by the autumnal rains of the preceding week. The garb of Autumn, indeed, resembled that of Spring. Dandelions and buttercups were sprinkled along the road-side, like drops of brightest gold in greenest grass, and a star-shaped little flower of blue, with a golden centre. In a rocky spot, and rooted under the stone-wall, there was one wild rose-bush, bearing three roses, very faintly tinted, but blessed with a spicy fragrance. The same tokens would have announced that the year was brightening into the glow of summer. There were violets, too, though few and pale ones. But the breath of September was diffused through the mild air, and became perceptible, too thrillingly for my enfeebled frame, whenever a little breeze shook out the latent coolness.

I was standing on the hill at the entrance of my native village, whence I had looked back to bid farewell, and forward to the pale mist-bow that over-arched my path, and was the omen of my fortunes. How had I misinterpreted that augury, the ghost of hope, with none of hope’s bright hues! Nor could I deem that all its portents were yet accomplished, though from the same western sky the declining sun shone brightly in my face. But I was calm and not depressed. Turning to the village, so dim and dream-like at my last view, I saw the white houses and brick stores, the intermingled trees, the foot-paths with their wide borders of grass, and the dusty road between; all a picture of peaceful gladness in the sunshine.

‘Why have I never loved my home before?’ thought I, as my spirit reposed itself on the quiet beauty of the scene.

On the side of the opposite hill was the grave-yard, sloping towards the farther extremity of the village. The sun shone as cheerfully there as on the abodes of the living, and showed all the little hillocks and the burial stones, white marble or slate, and here and there a tomb, with the pleasant grass about them all. A single tree was tinged with glory from the west, and threw a pensive shade behind. Not far from where it fell, was the tomb of my parents, whom I had hardly thought of in bidding adieu to the village, but had remembered them more faithfully among the feelings that drew me homeward. At my departure their tomb had been hidden in the morning mist. Beholding it in the sunshine now, I felt a sensation through my frame as if a breeze had thrown the coolness of September over me, though not a leaf was stirred, nor did the thistle down take flight. Was I to roam no more through this beautiful world, but only to the other end of the village? Then let me lie down near my parents, but not with them, because I love a green grave better than a tomb.

Moving slowly forward, I heard shouts and laughter, and perceived a considerable throng of people, who came from behind the meeting-house and made a stand in front of it. Thither all the idlers of the village were congregated to witness the exercises of the engine company, this being the afternoon of their monthly practice. They deluged the roof of the meeting-house, till the

water fell from the eaves in a broad cascade; then the stream beat against the dusty windows like a thunder storm; and sometimes they flung it up beside the steeple, sparkling in an ascending shower about the weather-cock. For variety's sake, the engineer made it undulate horizontally, like a great serpent flying over the earth. As his last effort, being roguishly inclined, he seemed to take aim at the sky, falling rather short of which, down came the fluid, transformed to drops of silver, on the thickest crowd of the spectators. Then ensued a prodigious rout and mirthful uproar, with no little wrath of the surly ones, whom this is an infallible method of distinguishing. The joke afforded infinite amusement to the ladies at the windows and some old people under the hay scales. I also laughed at a distance, and was glad to find myself susceptible, as of old, to the simple mirth of such a scene.

But the thoughts that it excited were not all mirthful. I had witnessed hundreds of such spectacles in my youth, and one precisely similar only a few days before my departure. And now, the aspect of the village being the same, and the crowd composed of my old acquaintances, I could hardly realize that years had past, or even months, or that the very drops of water were not falling at this moment which had been flung up then. But I pressed the conviction home, that, brief as the time appeared, it had been long enough for me to wander away and return again, with my fate accomplished, and little more hope in this world. The last throb of an adventurous and wayward spirit kept me from repining. I felt as if it were better, or not worse, to have compressed my enjoyments and sufferings into a few wild years, and then to rest myself in an early grave, than to have chosen the untroubled and ungladdened course of the crowd before me, whose days were all alike, and a long lifetime like each day. But the sentiment startled me. For a moment I doubted whether my dear-bought wisdom were any thing but the incapacity to pursue fresh follies, and whether, if health and strength could be restored that night, I should be found in the village after to-morrow's dawn.

Among other novelties, I noticed that the tavern was now designated as a Temperance House, in letters extending across the whole front, with a smaller sign promising Hot Coffee at all hours, and Spruce Beer to lodgers gratis. There were few new buildings, except a Methodist chapel and a printing office, with a book store in the lower story. The golden mortar still ornamented the apothecary's door, nor had the Indian Chief, with his gilded tobacco stalk, been relieved from doing centinel's duty before Dominicus Pike's grocery. The gorgeous silks, though of later patterns, were still flaunting like a banner in front of Mr. Nightingale's dry goods store. Some of the signs introduced me to strangers, whose predecessors had failed, or emigrated to the West, or removed merely to the other end of the village, transferring their names from the sign-boards to slabs of marble or slate. But, on the whole, Death and Vicissitude had done very little. There were old men, scattered about the street, who had been old in my earliest reminiscences; and, as if their venerable forms were permanent parts of the creation, they appeared to be hale and hearty old men yet. The less elderly were more altered, having generally contracted a stoop, with hair woefully thinned and whitened. Some I could hardly recognize; at my last glance they had been boys and girls, but were young men and women when I looked again; and there were happy little things too, rolling about on the grass, whom God had made since my departure.

But now, in my lingering course I had descended the hill, and began to consider, painfully enough, how I should meet my townspeople, and what reception they would give me. Of many an evil prophecy, doubtless, had I been the subject. And would they salute me with a roar of triumph or a low hiss of scorn, on beholding their worst anticipations more than accomplished?

'No,' said I, 'they will not triumph over me. And should they ask the cause of my return, I will tell them that a man may go far and tarry long away, if his health be good and his hopes high; but

that when flesh and spirit begin to fail, he remembers his birthplace and the old burial-ground, and hears a voice calling him to come home to his father and mother. They will know, by my wasted frame and feeble step, that I have heard the summons and obeyed. And, the first greetings over, they will let me walk among them unnoticed, and linger in the sunshine while I may, and steal into my grave in peace.'

With these reflections I looked kindly at the crowd, and drew off my glove, ready to give my hand to the first that should put forth his. It occurred to me, also, that some youth among them, now at the crisis of his fate, might have felt his bosom thrill at my example, and be emulous of my wild life and worthless fame. But I would save him.

'He shall be taught,' said I, 'by my life, and by my death, that the world is a sad one for him who shrinks from its sober duties. My experience shall warn him to adopt some great and serious aim, such as manhood will cling to, that he may not feel himself, too late, a cumberer of this over-laden earth, but a man among men. I will beseech him not to follow an eccentric path, nor, by stepping aside from the highway of human affairs, to relinquish his claim upon human sympathy. And often, as a text of deep and varied meaning, I will remind him that he is an American.'

By this time I had drawn near the meeting-house, and perceived that the crowd were beginning to recognize me.

These are the last words traced by his hand. Has not so chastened a spirit found true communion with the pure in Heaven?

"Until of late, I never could believe that I was seriously ill: the past, I thought, could not extend its misery beyond itself; life was restored to me, and should not be misused again. I had day-dreams even of wedded happiness. Still, as the days wear on, a faintness creeps through my frame and spirit, recalling the consciousness that a very old man might as well nourish hope and young desire as I at twenty-four. Yet the consciousness of my situation does not always make me sad. Sometimes I look upon the world with a quiet interest, because it cannot concern me personally, and a loving one for the same reason, because nothing selfish can interfere with the sense of brotherhood. Soon to be all spirit, I have already a spiritual sense of human nature, and see deeply into the hearts of mankind, discovering what is hidden from the wisest. The loves of young men and virgins are known to me, before the first kiss, before the whispered word, with the birth of the first sigh. My glance comprehends the crowd, and penetrates the breast of the solitary man. I think better of the world than formerly, more generously of its virtues, more mercifully of its faults, with a higher estimate of its present happiness, and brighter hopes of its destiny. My mind has put forth a second crop of blossoms, as the trees do in the Indian summer. No winter will destroy their beauty, for they are fanned by the breeze and freshened by the shower that breathes and falls in the gardens of Paradise!"