

HAWTHORNE NATHANIEL

A SELECT
PARTY

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A Select Party (From «Mosses From An Old Manse»)

A SELECT PARTY

The man of fancy made an entertainment at one of his castles in the air, and invited a select number of distinguished personages to favor him with their presence. The mansion, though less splendid than many that have been situated in the same region, was nevertheless of a magnificence such as is seldom witnessed by those acquainted only with terrestrial architecture. Its strong foundations and massive walls were quarried out of a ledge of heavy and sombre clouds which had hung brooding over the earth, apparently as dense and ponderous as its own granite, throughout a whole autumnal day. Perceiving that the general effect was gloomy, – so that the airy castle looked like a feudal fortress, or a monastery of the Middle Ages, or a state prison of our own times, rather than the home of pleasure and repose which he intended it to be, – the owner, regardless of expense, resolved to gild the exterior from top to bottom. Fortunately, there was just then a flood of evening sunshine in the air. This being gathered up and poured abundantly upon the

roof and walls, imbued them with a kind of solemn cheerfulness; while the cupolas and pinnacles were made to glitter with the purest gold, and all the hundred windows gleamed with a glad light, as if the edifice itself were rejoicing in its heart.

And now, if the people of the lower world chanced to be looking upward out of the turmoil of their petty perplexities, they probably mistook the castle in the air for a heap of sunset clouds, to which the magic of light and shade had imparted the aspect of a fantastically constructed mansion. To such beholders it was unreal, because they lacked the imaginative faith. Had they been worthy to pass within its portal, they would have recognized the truth, that the dominions which the spirit conquers for itself among unrealities become a thousand times more real than the earth whereon they stamp their feet, saying, "This is solid and substantial; this may be called a fact."

At the appointed hour, the host stood in his great saloon to receive the company. It was a vast and noble room, the vaulted ceiling of which was supported by double rows of gigantic pillars that had been hewn entire out of masses of variegated clouds. So brilliantly were they polished, and so exquisitely wrought by the sculptor's skill, as to resemble the finest specimens of emerald, porphyry, opal, and chrysolite, thus producing a delicate richness of effect which their immense size rendered not incompatible with grandeur. To each of these pillars a meteor was suspended. Thousands of these ethereal lustres are continually wandering about the firmament, burning out to waste, yet capable of

imparting a useful radiance to any person who has the art of converting them to domestic purposes. As managed in the saloon, they are far more economical than ordinary lamplight. Such, however, was the intensity of their blaze that it had been found expedient to cover each meteor with a globe of evening mist, thereby muffling the too potent glow and soothing it into a mild and comfortable splendor. It was like the brilliancy of a powerful yet chastened imagination, – a light which seemed to hide whatever was unworthy to be noticed and give effect to every beautiful and noble attribute. The guests, therefore, as they advanced up the centre of the saloon, appeared to better advantage than ever before in their lives.

The first that entered, with old-fashioned punctuality, was a venerable figure in the costume of bygone days, with his white hair flowing down over his shoulders and a reverend beard upon his breast. He leaned upon a staff, the tremulous stroke of which, as he set it carefully upon the floor, re-echoed through the saloon at every footstep. Recognizing at once this celebrated personage, whom it had cost him a vast deal of trouble and research to discover, the host advanced nearly three fourths of the distance down between the pillars to meet and welcome him.

“Venerable sir,” said the Man of Fancy, bending to the floor, “the honor of this visit would never be forgotten were my term of existence to be as happily prolonged as your own.”

The old gentleman received the compliment with gracious condescension. He then thrust up his spectacles over his forehead

and appeared to take a critical survey of the saloon.

“Never within my recollection,” observed he, “have I entered a more spacious and noble hall. But are you sure that it is built of solid materials and that the structure will be permanent?”

“O, never fear, my venerable friend,” replied the host. “In reference to a lifetime like your own, it is true my castle may well be called a temporary edifice. But it will endure long enough to answer all the purposes for which it was erected.”

But we forget that the reader has not yet been made acquainted with the guest. It was no other than that universally accredited character so constantly referred to in all seasons of intense cold or heat; he that, remembers the hot Sunday and the cold Friday; the witness of a past age whose negative reminiscences find their way into every newspaper, yet whose antiquated and dusky abode is so overshadowed by accumulated years and crowded back by modern edifices that none but the Man of Fancy could have discovered it; it was, in short, that twin brother of Time, and great-grandsire of mankind, and hand-and-glove associate of all forgotten men and things, – the Oldest Inhabitant. The host would willingly have drawn him into conversation, but succeeded only in eliciting a few remarks as to the oppressive atmosphere of this present summer evening compared with one which the guest had experienced about fourscore years ago. The old gentleman, in fact, was a good deal overcome by his journey among the clouds, which, to a frame so earth-incrusted by long continuance in a lower region, was unavoidably more fatiguing

than to younger spirits. He was therefore conducted to an easy-chair, well cushioned and stuffed with vaporous softness, and left to take a little repose.

The Man of Fancy now discerned another guest, who stood so quietly in the shadow of one of the pillars that he might easily have been overlooked.

“My dear sir,” exclaimed the host, grasping him warmly by the hand, “allow me to greet you as the hero of the evening. Pray do not take it as an empty compliment; for, if there were not another guest in my castle, it would be entirely pervaded with your presence.”

“I thank you,” answered the unpretending stranger; “but, though you happened to overlook me, I have not just arrived. I came very early; and, with your permission, shall remain after the rest of the company have retired.”

And who does the reader imagine was this unobtrusive guest? It was the famous performer of acknowledged impossibilities, – a character of superhuman capacity and virtue, and, if his enemies are to be credited, of no less remarkable weaknesses and defects. With a generosity with which he alone sets us an example, we will glance merely at his nobler attributes. He it is, then, who prefers the interests of others to his own and a humble station to an exalted one. Careless of fashion, custom, the opinions of men, and the influence of the press, he assimilates his life to the standard of ideal rectitude, and thus proves himself the one independent citizen of our free country. In point of ability,

many people declare him to be the only mathematician capable of squaring the circle; the only mechanic acquainted with the principle of perpetual motion; the only scientific philosopher who can compel water to run up hill; the only writer of the age whose genius is equal to the production of an epic poem; and, finally, so various are his accomplishments, the only professor of gymnastics who has succeeded in jumping down his own throat. With all these talents, however, he is so far from being considered a member of good society, that it is the severest censure of any fashionable assemblage to affirm that this remarkable individual was present. Public orators, lecturers, and theatrical performers particularly eschew his company. For especial reasons, we are not at liberty to disclose his name, and shall mention only one other trait, – a most singular phenomenon in natural philosophy, – that, when he happens to cast his eyes upon a looking-glass, he beholds Nobody reflected there!

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