

**HAWTHORNE
NATHANIEL**

OLD NEWS

Nathaniel Hawthorne

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Nathaniel Hawthorne

Old News / (From: «The Snow Image and Other Twice-Told Tales»)

I

There is a volume of what were once newspapers each on a small half-sheet, yellow and time-stained, of a coarse fabric, and imprinted with a rude old type. Their aspect conveys a singular impression of antiquity, in a species of literature which we are accustomed to consider as connected only with the present moment. Ephemeral as they were intended and supposed to be, they have long outlived the printer and his whole subscription-list, and have proved more durable, as to their physical existence, than most of the timber, bricks, and stone of the town where they were issued. These are but the least of their triumphs. The government, the interests, the opinions, in short, all the moral circumstances that were contemporary with their publication, have passed away, and left no better record of what they were than may be found in these frail leaves. Happy are the editors of newspapers! Their productions excel all others in immediate popularity, and are certain to acquire another sort of value with the lapse of time. They scatter their leaves to the wind, as the sibyl did, and posterity collects them, to be treasured up among the best materials of its wisdom. With hasty pens they write for immortality.

It is pleasant to take one of these little dingy half-sheets between the thumb and finger, and picture forth the personage who, above ninety years ago, held it, wet from the press, and steaming, before the fire. Many of the numbers bear the name of an old colonial dignitary. There he sits, a major, a member of the council, and a weighty merchant, in his high-backed arm-chair, wearing a solemn wig and grave attire, such as befits his imposing gravity of mien, and displaying but little finery, except a huge pair of silver shoe-buckles, curiously carved. Observe the awful reverence of his visage, as he reads his Majesty's most gracious speech; and the deliberate wisdom with which he ponders over some paragraph of provincial politics, and the keener intelligence with which he glances at the ship-news and commercial advertisements. Observe, and smile! He may have been a wise man in his day; but, to us, the wisdom of the politician appears like folly, because we can compare its prognostics with actual results; and the old merchant seems to have busied himself about vanities, because we know that the expected ships have been lost at sea, or mouldered at the wharves; that his imported broadcloths were long ago worn to tatters, and his cargoes of wine quaffed to the lees; and that the most precious leaves of his ledger have become waste-paper. Yet, his avocations were not so vain as our philosophic moralizing. In this world we are the things of a moment, and are made to pursue momentary things, with here and there a thought that stretches mistily towards eternity, and perhaps may endure as long. All philosophy that would abstract mankind from the present is no more than words.

The first pages of most of these old papers are as soporific as a bed of poppies. Here we have an erudite clergyman, or perhaps a Cambridge professor, occupying several successive weeks with a criticism on Tate and Brady, as compared with the New England version of the Psalms. Of course, the preference is given to the native article. Here are doctors disagreeing about the treatment of a putrid fever then prevalent, and blackguarding each other with a characteristic virulence that renders the controversy not altogether unreadable. Here are President Wigglesworth and the Rev. Dr. Colman, endeavoring to raise a fund for the support of missionaries among the Indians of Massachusetts Bay. Easy would be the duties of such a mission now! Here – for there is nothing new under the sun – are frequent complaints of the disordered state of the currency, and the project of a bank with a capital

of five hundred thousand pounds, secured on lands. Here are literary essays, from the Gentleman's Magazine; and squibs against the Pretender, from the London newspapers. And here, occasionally, are specimens of New England honor, laboriously light and lamentably mirthful, as if some very sober person, in his zeal to be merry, were dancing a jig to the tune of a funeral-psalm. All this is wearisome, and we must turn the leaf.

There is a good deal of amusement, and some profit, in the perusal of those little items which characterize the manners and circumstances of the country. New England was then in a state incomparably more picturesque than at present, or than it has been within the memory of man; there being, as yet, only a narrow strip of civilization along the edge of a vast forest, peopled with enough of its original race to contrast the savage life with the old customs of another world. The white population, also, was diversified by the influx of all sorts of expatriated vagabonds, and by the continual importation of bond-servants from Ireland and elsewhere, so that there was a wild and unsettled multitude, forming a strong minority to the sober descendants of the Puritans. Then, there were the slaves, contributing their dark shade to the picture of society. The consequence of all this was a great variety and singularity of action and incident, many instances of which might be selected from these columns, where they are told with a simplicity and quaintness of style that bring the striking points into very strong relief. It is natural to suppose, too, that these circumstances affected the body of the people, and made their course of life generally less regular than that of their descendants. There is no evidence that the moral standard was higher then than now; or, indeed, that morality was so well defined as it has since become. There seem to have been quite as many frauds and robberies, in proportion to the number of honest deeds; there were murders, in hot-blood and in malice; and bloody quarrels over liquor. Some of our fathers also appear to have been yoked to unfaithful wives, if we may trust the frequent notices of elopements from bed and board. The pillory, the whipping-post, the prison, and the gallows, each had their use in those old times; and, in short, as often as our imagination lives in the past, we find it a ruder and rougher age than our own, with hardly any perceptible advantages, and much that gave life a gloomier tinge. In vain we endeavor to throw a sunny and joyous air over our picture of this period; nothing passes before our fancy but a crowd of sad-visaged people, moving duskily through a dull gray atmosphere. It is certain that winter rushed upon them with fiercer storms than now, blocking up the narrow forest-paths, and overwhelming the roads along the sea-coast with mountain snow drifts; so that weeks elapsed before the newspaper could announce how many travellers had perished, or what wrecks had strewn the shore. The cold was more piercing then, and lingered further into the spring, making the chimney-corner a comfortable seat till long past May-day. By the number of such accidents on record, we might suppose that the thunder-stone, as they termed it, fell oftener and deadlier on steeples, dwellings, and unsheltered wretches. In fine, our fathers bore the brunt of more raging and pitiless elements than we. There were forebodings, also, of a more fearful tempest than those of the elements. At two or three dates, we have stories of drums, trumpets, and all sorts of martial music, passing athwart the midnight sky, accompanied with the – roar of cannon and rattle of musketry, prophetic echoes of the sounds that were soon to shake the land. Besides these airy prognostics, there were rumors of French fleets on the coast, and of the march of French and Indians through the wilderness, along the borders of the settlements. The country was saddened, moreover, with grievous sicknesses. The small-pox raged in many of the towns, and seems, though so familiar a scourge, to have been regarded with as much affright as that which drove the throng from Wall Street and Broadway at the approach of a new pestilence. There were autumnal fevers too, and a contagious and destructive throat-distemper, – diseases unwritten in medical books. The dark superstition of former days had not yet been so far dispelled as not to heighten the gloom of the present times. There is an advertisement, indeed, by a committee of the Legislature, calling for information as to the circumstances of sufferers in the "late calamity of 1692," with a view to reparation for their losses and misfortunes. But the tenderness with which, after above forty years, it was thought expedient to allude to the witchcraft delusion, indicates a good deal of lingering error,

as well as the advance of more enlightened opinions. The rigid hand of Puritanism might yet be felt upon the reins of government, while some of the ordinances intimate a disorderly spirit on the part of the people. The Suffolk justices, after a preamble that great disturbances have been committed by persons entering town and leaving it in coaches, chaises, calashes, and other wheel-carriages, on the evening before the Sabbath, give notice that a watch will hereafter be set at the "fortification-gate," to prevent these outrages. It is amusing to see Boston assuming the aspect of a walled city, guarded, probably, by a detachment of church-members, with a deacon at their head. Governor Belcher makes proclamation against certain "loose and dissolute people" who have been wont to stop passengers in the streets, on the Fifth of November, "otherwise called Pope's Day," and levy contributions for the building of bonfires. In this instance, the populace are more puritanic than the magistrate.

The elaborate solemnities of funerals were in accordance with the sombre character of the times. In cases of ordinary death, the printer seldom fails to notice that the corpse was "very decently interred." But when some mightier mortal has yielded to his fate, the decease of the "worshipful" such-a-one is announced, with all his titles of deacon, justice, councillor, and colonel; then follows an heraldic sketch of his honorable ancestors, and lastly an account of the black pomp of his funeral, and the liberal expenditure of scarfs, gloves, and mourning rings. The burial train glides slowly before us, as we have seen it represented in the woodcuts of that day, the coffin, and the bearers, and the lamentable friends, trailing their long black garments, while grim Death, a most misshapen skeleton, with all kinds of doleful emblems, stalks hideously in front. There was a coach maker at this period, one John Lucas, who scents to have gained the chief of his living by letting out a sable coach to funerals. It would not be fair, however, to leave quite so dismal an impression on the reader's mind; nor should it be forgotten that happiness may walk soberly in dark attire, as well as dance lightsomely in a gala-dress. And this reminds us that there is an incidental notice of the "dancing-school near the Orange-Tree," whence we may infer that the salutary art was occasionally practised, though perhaps chastened into a characteristic gravity of movement. This pastime was probably confined to the aristocratic circle, of which the royal governor was the centre. But we are scandalized at the attempt of Jonathan Furness to introduce a more reprehensible amusement: he challenges the whole country to match his black gelding in a race for a hundred pounds, to be decided on Metonomy Common or Chelsea Beach. Nothing as to the manners of the times can be inferred from this freak of an individual. There were no daily and continual opportunities of being merry; but sometimes the people rejoiced, in their own peculiar fashion, oftener with a calm, religious smile than with a broad laugh, as when they feasted, like one great family, at Thanksgiving time, or indulged a livelier mirth throughout the pleasant days of Election-week. This latter was the true holiday season of New England. Military musters were too seriously important in that warlike time to be classed among amusements; but they stirred up and enlivened the public mind, and were occasions of solemn festival to the governor and great men of the province, at the expense of the field-offices. The Revolution blotted a feast-day out of our calendar; for the anniversary of the king's birth appears to have been celebrated with most imposing pomp, by salutes from Castle William, a military parade, a grand dinner at the town-house, and a brilliant illumination in the evening. There was nothing forced nor feigned in these testimonials of loyalty to George the Second. So long as they dreaded the re-establishment of a popish dynasty, the people were fervent for the house of Hanover: and, besides, the immediate magistracy of the country was a barrier between the monarch and the occasional discontents of the colonies; the waves of faction sometimes reached the governor's chair, but never swelled against the throne. Thus, until oppression was felt to proceed from the king's own hand, New England rejoiced with her whole heart on his Majesty's birthday.

But the slaves, we suspect, were the merriest part of the population, since it was their gift to be merry in the worst of circumstances; and they endured, comparatively, few hardships, under the domestic sway of our fathers. There seems to have been a great trade in these human commodities. No advertisements are more frequent than those of "a negro fellow, fit for almost any household work";

"a negro woman, honest, healthy, and capable"; "a negro wench of many desirable qualities"; "a negro man, very fit for a taylor." We know not in what this natural fitness for a tailor consisted, unless it were some peculiarity of conformation that enabled him to sit cross-legged. When the slaves of a family were inconveniently prolific, – it being not quite orthodox to drown the superfluous offspring, like a litter of kittens, – notice was promulgated of "a negro child to be given away." Sometimes the slaves assumed the property of their own persons, and made their escape; among many such instances, the governor raises a hue-and-cry after his negro Juba. But, without venturing a word in extenuation of the general system, we confess our opinion that Caesar, Pompey, Scipio, and all such great Roman namesakes, would have been better advised had they stayed at home, foddering the cattle, cleaning dishes, – in fine, performing their moderate share of the labors of life, without being harassed by its cares. The sable inmates of the mansion were not excluded from the domestic affections: in families of middling rank, they had their places at the board; and when the circle closed round the evening hearth, its blaze glowed on their dark shining faces, intermixed familiarly with their master's children. It must have contributed to reconcile them to their lot, that they saw white men and women imported from Europe as they had been from Africa, and sold, though only for a term of years, yet as actual slaves to the highest bidder. Slave labor being but a small part of the industry of the country, it did not change the character of the people; the latter, on the contrary, modified and softened the institution, making it a patriarchal, and almost a beautiful, peculiarity of the times.

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