

The Vision of the Fountain

Nathaniel Hawthorne

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About Hawthorne:

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born on July 4, 1804, in Salem, Massachusetts, where his birthplace is now a museum. William Hathorne, who emigrated from England in 1630, was the first of Hawthorne's ancestors to arrive in the colonies. After arriving, William persecuted Quakers. William's son John Hathorne was one of the judges who oversaw the Salem Witch Trials. (One theory is that having learned about this, the author added the "w" to his surname in his early twenties, shortly after graduating from college.) Hawthorne's father, Nathaniel Hathorne, Sr., was a sea captain who died in 1808 of yellow fever, when Hawthorne was only four years old, in Raymond, Maine. Hawthorne attended Bowdoin College at the expense of an uncle from 1821 to 1824, befriendng classmates Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and future president Franklin Pierce. While there he joined the Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity. Until the publication of his *Twice-Told Tales* in 1837, Hawthorne wrote in the comparative obscurity of what he called his "owl's nest" in the family home. As he looked back on this period of his life, he wrote: "I have not lived, but only dreamed about living." And yet it was this period of brooding and writing that had formed, as Malcolm Cowley was to describe it, "the central fact in Hawthorne's career," his "term of apprenticeship" that would eventually result in the "richly meditated fiction." Hawthorne was hired in 1839 as a weigher and gauger at the Boston Custom House. He had become engaged in the previous year to the illustrator and transcendentalist Sophia Peabody. Seeking a possible home for himself and Sophia, he joined the transcendentalist utopian community at Brook Farm in 1841; later that year, however, he left when he became dissatisfied with farming and the experiment. (His Brook Farm adventure would prove an inspiration for his novel *The Blithedale Romance*.) He married Sophia in 1842; they moved to The Old Manse in Concord, Massachusetts, where they lived for three years. There he wrote most of the tales collected in *Mosses from an Old Manse*. Hawthorne and his wife then moved to Salem and later to the Berkshires, returning in 1852 to Concord and a new home The Wayside, previously owned by the Alcotts. Their neighbors in Concord included Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Like Hawthorne, Sophia was a reclusive person. She was bedridden with headaches until her sister introduced her to Hawthorne, after which her headaches seem to have abated. The Hawthornes enjoyed a long marriage, often taking walks in the park. Sophia greatly admired her husband's work. In one of her journals, she writes: "I am always so dazzled and bewildered with the richness, the depth, the... jewels of beauty in his productions that I am always looking forward to a second reading where I can ponder and muse and fully take in the miraculous wealth of thoughts." In 1846, Hawthorne was appointed surveyor (determining the quantity and value of imported goods) at the Salem Custom House. Like his earlier appointment to the custom house in Boston, this employment was vulnerable to the politics of the spoils system. A Democrat, Hawthorne lost this job due to the change of administration in Washington after the presidential election of 1848. Hawthorne's career as a novelist was boosted by *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850, in which the preface refers to his three-year tenure in the Custom House at Salem. *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) and *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) followed in quick succession. In 1852, he wrote the campaign biography of his old friend Franklin Pierce. With Pierce's election as president, Hawthorne was rewarded in 1853 with the position of United States consul in Liverpool. In 1857, his appointment ended and the Hawthorne family toured France and Italy. They returned to The Wayside in 1860, and that year saw the publication of *The Marble Faun*. Failing health (which biographer Edward Miller speculates was stomach cancer) prevented him from completing several more romances. Hawthorne died in his sleep on May 19, 1864, in Plymouth, New Hampshire while on a tour of the White Mountains with Pierce. He was buried in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, Concord, Massachusetts. Wife Sophia and daughter Una were

originally buried in England. However, in June 2006, they were re-interred in plots adjacent to Nathaniel. Nathaniel and Sophia Hawthorne had three children: Una, Julian, and Rose. Una was a victim of mental illness and died young. Julian moved out west, served a jail term for embezzlement and wrote a book about his father. Rose married George Parsons Lathrop and they became Roman Catholics. After George's death, Rose became a Dominican nun. She founded the Dominican Sisters of Hawthorne to care for victims of incurable cancer. Source: Wikipedia

Also available on Feedbooks Hawthorne:

- *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)
- *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851)
- *The Minister's Black Veil* (1837)
- *Rappaccini's Daughter* (1844)
- *The Birth-Mark* (1843)
- *Biographical Stories* (1842)
- *Young Goodman Brown* (1835)
- *The Blithedale Romance* (1852)
- *Fire Worship* (1843)
- *The Marble Faun* (1860)

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At fifteen I became a resident in a country village more than a hundred miles from home. The morning after my arrival—a September morning, but warm and bright as any in July—I rambled into a wood of oaks with a few walnut trees intermixed, forming the closest shade above my head. The ground was rocky, uneven, overgrown with bushes and clumps of young saplings and traversed only by cattle-paths. The track which I chanced to follow led me to a crystal spring with a border of grass as freshly green as on May morning, and overshadowed by the limb of a great oak. One solitary sunbeam found its way down and played like a goldfish in the water.

From my childhood I have loved to gaze into a spring. The water filled a circular basin, small but deep and set round with stones, some of which were covered with slimy moss, the others naked and of variegated hue—reddish, white and brown. The bottom was covered with coarse sand, which sparkled in the lonely sunbeam and seemed to illuminate the spring with an unborrowed light. In one spot the gush of the water violently agitated the sand, but without obscuring the fountain or breaking the glassiness of its surface. It appeared as if some living creature were about to emerge—the naiad of the spring, perhaps, in the shape of a beautiful young woman with a gown of filmy water-moss, a belt of rainbow-drops and a cold, pure, passionless countenance. How would the beholder shiver, pleasantly yet fearfully, to see her sitting on one of the stones, paddling her white feet in the ripples and throwing up water to sparkle in the sun! Wherever she laid her hands on grass and flowers, they would immediately be moist, as with morning dew. Then would she set about her labors, like a careful housewife, to clear the fountain of withered leaves, and bits of slimy wood, and old acorns from the oaks above, and grains of corn left by cattle in drinking, till the bright sand in the bright water were like a treasury of diamonds. But, should the intruder approach too near, he would find only the drops of a summer shower glistening about the spot where he had seen her.

Reclining on the border of grass where the dewy goddess should have been, I bent forward, and a pair of eyes met mine within the watery mirror. They were the reflection of my own. I looked again, and, lo! another face, deeper in the fountain than my own image, more distinct in all the features, yet faint as thought. The vision had the aspect of a fair young girl with locks of paly gold. A mirthful expression laughed in the eyes and dimpled over the whole shadowy countenance, till it seemed just what a fountain would be if, while dancing merrily into the sunshine, it should assume the shape of woman. Through the dim rosiness of the cheeks I could see the brown leaves, the slimy twigs, the acorns and the sparkling sand. The solitary sunbeam was diffused among the golden hair, which melted into its faint brightness and became a glory round that head so beautiful.

My description can give no idea how suddenly the fountain was thus tenanted and how soon it was left desolate. I breathed, and there was the face; I held my breath, and it was gone. Had it passed away or faded into nothing? I doubted whether it had ever been.

My sweet readers, what a dreamy and delicious hour did I spend where that vision found and left me! For a long time I sat perfectly still, waiting till it should reappear, and fearful that the slightest motion, or even the flutter of my breath, might frighten it away. Thus have I often started from a pleasant dream, and then kept quiet in hopes to wile it back. Deep were my musings as to the race and attributes of that ethereal being. Had I created her? Was she the daughter of my fancy, akin to those strange shapes which peep under the lids of children's eyes? And did her beauty gladden me for that one moment and then die? Or was she a water-nymph within the fountain, or fairy or woodland goddess peeping over my shoulder, or the ghost of some forsaken maid who had drowned herself for love? Or, in good truth, had a lovely girl with a warm heart and lips that would bear pressure stolen softly behind me and thrown her image into the spring?

I watched and waited, but no vision came again. I departed, but with a spell upon me which drew

me back that same afternoon to the haunted spring. There was the water gushing, the sand sparkling and the sunbeam glimmering. There the vision was not, but only a great frog, the hermit of that solitude, who immediately withdrew his speckled snout and made himself invisible—all except a pair of long legs—beneath a stone. Methought he had a devilish look. I could have slain him as an enchanter who kept the mysterious beauty imprisoned in the fountain.

Sad and heavy, I was returning to the village. Between me and the church-spire rose a little hill, and on its summit a group of trees insulated from all the rest of the wood, with their own share of radiance hovering on them from the west and their own solitary shadow falling to the east. The afternoon being far declined, the sunshine was almost pensive and the shade almost cheerful; glory and gloom were mingled in the placid light, as if the spirits of the Day and Evening had met in friendship under those trees and found themselves akin. I was admiring the picture when the shape of a young girl emerged from behind the clump of oaks. My heart knew her: it was the vision, but so distant and ethereal did she seem, so unmingled with earth, so imbued with the pensive glory of the spot where she was standing, that my spirit sunk within me, sadder than before. How could I ever reach her?

While I gazed a sudden shower came pattering down upon the leaves. In a moment the air was full of brightness, each raindrop catching a portion of sunlight as it fell, and the whole gentle shower appearing like a mist, just substantial enough to bear the burden of radiance. A rainbow vivid as Niagara's was painted in the air. Its southern limb came down before the group of trees and enveloped the fair vision as if the hues of heaven were the only garment for her beauty. When the rainbow vanished, she who had seemed a part of it was no longer there. Was her existence absorbed in nature's loveliest phenomenon, and did her pure frame dissolve away in the varied light? Yet I would not despair of her return, for, robed in the rainbow, she was the emblem of Hope.

Thus did the vision leave me, and many a doleful day succeeded to the parting moment. By the spring and in the wood and on the hill and through the village, at dewy sunrise, burning noon, and at that magic hour of sunset, when she had vanished from my sight, I sought her, but in vain. Weeks came and went, months rolled away, and she appeared not in them. I imparted my mystery to none, but wandered to and fro or sat in solitude like one that had caught a glimpse of heaven and could take no more joy on earth. I withdrew into an inner world where my thoughts lived and breathed, and the vision in the midst of them. Without intending it, I became at once the author and hero of a romance, conjuring up rivals, imagining events, the actions of others and my own, and experiencing every change of passion, till jealousy and despair had their end in bliss. Oh, had I the burning fancy of my early youth with manhood's colder gift, the power of expression, your hearts, sweet ladies, should flutter at my tale.

In the middle of January I was summoned home. The day before my departure, visiting the spots which had been hallowed by the vision, I found that the spring had a frozen bosom, and nothing but the snow and a glare of winter sunshine on the hill of the rainbow. "Let me hope," thought I, "or my heart will be as icy as the fountain and the whole world as desolate as this snowy hill." Most of the day was spent in preparing for the journey, which was to commence at four o'clock the next morning. About an hour after supper, when all was in readiness, I descended from my chamber to the sitting-room to take leave of the old clergyman and his family with whom I had been an inmate. A gust of wind blew out my lamp as I passed through the entry.

According to their invariable custom—so pleasant a one when the fire blazes cheerfully—the family were sitting in the parlor with no other light than what came from the hearth. As the good clergyman's scanty stipend compelled him to use all sorts of economy, the foundation of his fires was

always a large heap of tan, or ground bark, which would smoulder away from morning till night with a dull warmth and no flame. This evening the heap of tan was newly put on and surmounted with three sticks of red oak full of moisture, and a few pieces of dry pine that had not yet kindled. There was no light except the little that came sullenly from two half-burnt brands, without even glimmering on the andirons. But I knew the position of the old minister's arm-chair, and also where his wife sat with her knitting-work, and how to avoid his two daughters—one a stout country lass, and the other a consumptive girl. Groping through the gloom, I found my own place next to that of the son, a learned collegian who had come home to keep school in the village during the winter vacation. I noticed that there was less room than usual to-night between the collegian's chair and mine.

As people are always taciturn in the dark, not a word was said for some time after my entrance. Nothing broke the stillness but the regular click of the matron's knitting-needles. At times the fire threw out a brief and dusky gleam which twinkled on the old man's glasses and hovered doubtfully round our circle, but was far too faint to portray the individuals who composed it. Were we not like ghosts? Dreamy as the scene was, might it not be a type of the mode in which departed people who had known and loved each other here would hold communion in eternity? We were aware of each other's presence, not by sight nor sound nor touch, but by an inward consciousness. Would it not be so among the dead?

The silence was interrupted by the consumptive daughter addressing a remark to some one in the circle whom she called Rachel. Her tremulous and decayed accents were answered by a single word, but in a voice that made me start and bend toward the spot whence it had proceeded. Had I ever heard that sweet, low tone? If not, why did it rouse up so many old recollections, or mockeries of such, the shadows of things familiar yet unknown, and fill my mind with confused images of her features who had spoken, though buried in the gloom of the parlor? Whom had my heart recognized, that it throbbed so? I listened to catch her gentle breathing, and strove by the intensity of my gaze to picture forth a shape where none was visible.

Suddenly the dry pine caught; the fire blazed up with a ruddy glow, and where the darkness had been, there was she—the vision of the fountain. A spirit of radiance only, she had vanished with the rainbow and appeared again in the firelight, perhaps to flicker with the blaze and be gone. Yet her cheek was rosy and lifelike, and her features, in the bright warmth of the room, were even sweeter and tenderer than my recollection of them. She knew me. The mirthful expression that had laughed in her eyes and dimpled over her countenance when I beheld her faint beauty in the fountain was laughing and dimpling there now. One moment our glance mingled; the next, down rolled the heap of tan upon the kindled wood, and darkness snatched away that daughter of the light, and gave her back to me no more!

Fair ladies, there is nothing more to tell. Must the simple mystery be revealed, then, that Rachel was the daughter of the village squire and had left home for a boarding-school the morning after I arrived and returned the day before my departure? If I transformed her to an angel, it is what every youthful lover does for his mistress. Therein consists the essence of my story. But slight the change, sweet maids, to make angels of yourselves.



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