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Hawthorne

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A SELECT PARTY

A Select Party

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

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!

Several other guests now made their appearance; and among them, chattering with immense volubility, a brisk little gentleman of universal vogue in private society, and not unknown in the public journals under the title of Monsieur On-Dit. The name would seem to indicate a Frenchman; but, whatever be his country, he is thoroughly versed in all the languages of the day, and can express himself quite as much to the purpose in English as in any other tongue. No sooner were the ceremonies of salutation over than this talkative little person put his mouth to the host's ear and whispered three secrets of state, an important piece of commercial intelligence, and a rich item of fashionable scandal. He then assured the Man of Fancy that he would not fail to circulate in the society of the lower world a minute description of this magnificent castle in the air and of the festivities at which he had the honor to be a guest. So saying, Monsieur On-Dit made his bow and hurried from one to another of the company, with all of whom he seemed to be acquainted and to possess some topic of interest or amusement for every individual. Coming at last to the Oldest Inhabitant, who was slumbering comfortably in the easy-chair, he applied his mouth to that venerable ear.

“What do you say?” cried the old gentleman, starting from his nap and putting up his hand to serve the purpose of an ear-trumpet.

Monsieur On-Dit bent forward again and repeated his communication.

"Never within my memory," exclaimed the Oldest Inhabitant, lifting his hands in astonishment, "has so remarkable an incident been heard of."

Now came in the Clerk of the Weather, who had been invited out of deference to his official station, although the host was well aware that his conversation was likely to contribute but little to the general enjoyment. He soon, indeed, got into a corner with his acquaintance of long ago, the Oldest Inhabitant, and began to compare notes with him in reference to the great storms, gales of wind, and other atmospheric facts that had occurred during a century past. It rejoiced the Man of Fancy that his venerable and much-respected guest had met with so congenial an associate. Entreating them both to make themselves perfectly at home, he now turned to receive the Wandering Jew. This personage, however, had latterly grown so common, by mingling in all sorts of society and appearing at the beck of every entertainer, that he could hardly be deemed a proper guest in a very exclusive circle. Besides, being covered with dust from his continual wanderings along the highways of the world, he really looked out of place in a dress party; so that the host felt relieved of an incommodity when the restless individual in question, after a brief stay, took his departure on a ramble towards Oregon.

The portal was now thronged by a crowd of shadowy people with whom the Man of Fancy had been acquainted in his visionary youth. He had invited them hither for the sake of observing how they would compare, whether advantageously or otherwise, with the real characters to whom his maturer life had introduced him. They were beings of crude imagination, such as glide before a young man's eye and pretend to be actual inhabitants of the earth; the wise and witty with whom he would hereafter hold intercourse; the generous and heroic friends whose devotion would be requited with his own; the beautiful dream-woman who would become the helpmate of his human toils and sorrows and at once the source and partaker of his happiness. Alas! it is not good for the full-grown man to look too closely at these old acquaintances, but rather to reverence them at a distance through the medium of years that have gathered duskily between. There was something laughably untrue in their pompous stride and exaggerated sentiment; they were neither human nor tolerable likenesses of humanity, but fantastic maskers, rendering heroism and nature alike ridiculous by the grave absurdity of their pretensions to such attributes; and as for the peerless dream-lady, behold! there advanced up the saloon, with a movement like a jointed doll, a sort of wax-figure of an angel, a creature as cold as moonshine, an artifice in petticoats, with an intellect of pretty phrases and only the semblance of a heart, yet in all these particulars the true type of a young man's imaginary mistress. Hardly could the host's punctilious courtesy restrain a smile as he paid his respects to this unreality and met the sentimental glance with which the Dream sought to remind him of their former love passages.

"No, no, fair lady," murmured he betwixt sighing and smiling; "my taste is changed; I have learned to love what Nature makes better than my own creations in the guise of womanhood."

"Ah, false one," shrieked the dream-lady, pretending to faint, but dissolving into thin air, out of which came the deplorable murmur of her voice, "your inconstancy has annihilated me."

"So be it," said the cruel Man of Fancy to himself; "and a good riddance too."

Together with these shadows, and from the same region, there came an uninvited multitude of shapes which at any time during his life had tormented the Man of Fancy in his moods of morbid melancholy or had haunted him in the delirium of fever. The walls of his castle in the air were not dense enough to keep them out, nor would the strongest of earthly architecture have availed to their exclusion. Here were those forms of dim terror which had beset him at the entrance of life, waging warfare with his hopes; here were strange uglinesses of earlier date, such as haunt children in the night-time. He was particularly startled by the vision of a deformed old black woman whom he imagined as lurking in the garret of his native home, and who, when he was an infant, had once come to his bedside and grinned at him in the crisis of a scarlet fever. This same black shadow, with others almost as hideous, now glided among the pillars of the magnificent saloon, grinning recognition, until the man shuddered anew at the forgotten terrors of his childhood. It amused him, however, to observe the black woman, with the mischievous caprice peculiar to such beings, steal up to the chair of the Oldest Inhabitant and peep into his half-dreamy mind.

"Never within my memory," muttered that venerable personage, aghast, "did I see such a face."

Almost immediately after the unrealities just described, arrived a number of guests whom incredulous readers may be inclined to rank equally among creatures of imagination. The most noteworthy were an incorruptible Patriot; a Scholar without pedantry; a Priest without worldly ambition; and a Beautiful Woman without pride or coquetry; a Married Pair whose life had never been disturbed by incongruity of feeling; a Reformer untrammelled by his theory; and a Poet who felt no jealousy towards other votaries of the lyre. In truth, however, the host was not one of the cynics who consider these patterns of excellence, without the fatal flaw, such rarities in the world; and he had invited them to his select party chiefly out of humble deference to the judgment of society, which pronounces them almost impossible to be met with.

"In my younger days," observed the Oldest Inhabitant, "such characters might be seen at the corner of every street."

Be that as it might, these specimens of perfection proved to be not half so entertaining companions as people with the ordinary allowance of faults.

But now appeared a stranger, whom the host had no sooner recognized than, with an abundance of courtesy unlavished on any other, he hastened down the whole length of the saloon in order to pay him emphatic honor. Yet he was a young man in poor attire, with no insignia of rank or acknowledged eminence, nor anything to distinguish him among the crowd except a high, white forehead, beneath which a pair of deep-set eyes were glowing with warm light. It was such a light as never illuminates the earth save when a great heart burns as the household fire of a grand intellect. And who was he?—who but the Master Genius for whom our country is looking anxiously into the mist of Time, as destined to fulfil the great mission of creating an American literature, hewing it, as it were, out of the unwrought granite of our intellectual quarries? From him, whether moulded in the form of an epic poem or assuming a guise altogether new as the spirit itself may determine, we are to receive our first great original work, which shall do all that remains to be achieved for our glory among the nations. How this child of a mighty destiny had been discovered by the Man of Fancy it is of little consequence to mention. Suffice it that he dwells as yet unhonored among men, unrecognized by those who have known him from his cradle; the noble countenance which should be distinguished by a halo diffused around it passes daily amid the throng of people toiling and troubling themselves about the trifles of a moment, and none pay reverence to the worker of immortality. Nor does it matter much to him, in his triumph over all the ages, though a generation or two of his own times shall do themselves the wrong to disregard him.

By this time Monsieur On-Dit had caught up the stranger's name and destiny and was busily whispering the intelligence among the other guests.

"Pshaw!" said one. "There can never be an American genius."

"Pish!" cried another. "We have already as good poets as any in the world. For my part, I desire to see no better."

And the Oldest Inhabitant, when it was proposed to introduce him to the Master Genius, begged to be excused, observing that a man who had been honored with the acquaintance of Dwight, and Freneau, and Joel Barlow, might be allowed a little austerity of taste.

The saloon was now fast filling up by the arrival of other remarkable characters, among whom were noticed Davy Jones, the distinguished nautical personage, and a rude, carelessly dressed, harum-scarum sort of elderly fellow, known by the nickname of Old Harry. The latter, however, after being shown to a dressing-room, reappeared with his gray hair nicely combed, his clothes brushed, a clean dicky on his neck, and altogether so changed in aspect as to merit the more respectful appellation of Venerable Henry. Joel Doe and Richard Roe came arm in arm, accompanied by a Man of Straw, a fictitious indorser, and several persons who had no existence except as voters in closely contested elections. The celebrated Seatsfield, who now entered, was at first supposed to belong to the same brotherhood, until he made it apparent that he was a real man of flesh and blood and had his earthly domicile in Germany. Among the latest comers, as might reasonably be expected, arrived a guest from the far future.

"Do you know him? do you know him?" whispered Monsieur On-Dit, who seemed to be acquainted with everybody. "He is the representative of Posterity,—the man of an age to come."

"And how came he here?" asked a figure who was evidently the prototype of the fashion-plate in a magazine, and might be taken to represent the vanities of the passing moment. "The fellow infringes upon our rights by coming before his time."

"But you forget where we are," answered the Man of Fancy, who overheard the remark. "The lower earth, it is true, will be forbidden ground to him for many long years hence; but a castle in the air is a sort of no-man's-land, where Posterity may make acquaintance with us on equal terms."

No sooner was his identity known than a throng of guests gathered about Posterity, all expressing the most generous interest in his welfare, and many boasting of the sacrifices which they had made, or were willing to make, in his behalf. Some, with as much secrecy as possible, desired his judgment upon certain copies of verses or great manuscript rolls of prose; others accosted him with the familiarity of old friends, taking it for granted that he was perfectly cognizant of their names and characters. At length, finding himself thus beset, Posterity was put quite beside his patience.

"Gentlemen, my good friends," cried he, breaking loose from a misty poet who strove to hold him by the button, "I pray you to attend to your own business, and leave me to take care of mine! I expect to owe you nothing, unless it be certain national debts, and other encumbrances and impediments, physical and moral, which I shall find it troublesome enough to remove from my path. As to your verses, pray read them to your contemporaries. Your names are as strange to me as your faces; and even were it otherwise,—let me whisper you a secret,—the cold, icy memory which one generation may retain of another is but a poor recompense to barter life for. Yet, if your heart is set on being known to me, the surest, the only method is, to live truly and wisely for your own age, whereby, if the native force be in you, you may likewise live for posterity."

"It is nonsense," murmured the Oldest Inhabitant, who, as a man of the past, felt jealous that all notice should be withdrawn from himself to be lavished on the future, "sheer nonsense, to waste so much thought on what only is to be."

To divert the minds of his guests, who were considerably abashed by this little incident, the Man of Fancy led them through several apartments of the castle, receiving their compliments upon the taste and varied magnificence that were displayed in each. One of these rooms was filled with moonlight, which did not enter through the window, but was the aggregate of all the moonshine that is scattered around the earth on a summer night while no eyes are awake to enjoy its beauty. Airy spirits had gathered it up, wherever they found it gleaming on the broad bosom of a lake, or silvering the meanders of a stream, or glimmering among the wind-stirred boughs of a wood, and had garnered it in this one spacious hall. Along the walls, illuminated by the mild intensity of the moonshine, stood a multitude of ideal statues, the original conceptions of the great works of ancient or modern art, which the sculptors did but imperfectly succeed in putting into marble; for it is not to be supposed that the pure idea of an immortal creation ceases to exist; it is only necessary to know where they are deposited in order to obtain possession of them.—In the alcoves of another vast apartment was arranged a splendid library, the volumes of which were inestimable, because they consisted, not of actual performances, but of the works which the authors only planned, without ever finding the happy season to achieve them. To take familiar instances, here were the untold tales of Chaucer's *Canterbury Pilgrims*; the unwritten cantos of the *Fairy Queen*; the conclusion of Coleridge's *Christabel*; and the whole of Dryden's projected epic on the subject of *King Arthur*. The shelves were crowded; for it would not be too much to affirm that every author has imagined and shaped out in his thought more and far better works than those which actually proceeded from his pen. And here, likewise, where the unrealized conceptions of youthful poets who died of the very strength of their own genius before the world had caught one inspired murmur from their lips.

When the peculiarities of the library and statue-gallery were explained to the Oldest Inhabitant, he appeared infinitely perplexed, and exclaimed, with more energy than usual, that he had never heard of such a thing within his memory, and, moreover, did not at all understand how it could be.

"But my brain, I think," said the good old gentleman, "is getting not so clear as it used to be. You young folks, I suppose, can see your way through these strange matters. For my part, I give it up."

"And so do I," muttered the Old Harry. "It is enough to puzzle the—Ahem!"

Making as little reply as possible to these observations, the Man of Fancy preceded the company to another noble saloon, the pillars of which were solid golden sunbeams taken out of the sky in the first hour in the morning. Thus, as they retained all their living lustre, the room was filled with the most cheerful radiance imaginable, yet not too dazzling to be borne with comfort and delight. The windows were beautifully adorned with curtains made of the many-colored clouds of sunrise, all imbued with virgin light, and hanging in magnificent festoons from the ceiling to the floor. Moreover, there were fragments of rainbows scattered through the room; so that the guests, astonished at one another, reciprocally saw their heads made glorious by the seven primary hues; or, if they chose,—as who would not?—they could grasp a rainbow in the air and convert it to their own apparel and adornment. But the morning light and scattered rainbows were only a type and symbol of the real wonders of the apartment. By an influence akin to magic, yet perfectly natural, whatever means and opportunities of joy are neglected in the lower world had been carefully gathered up and deposited in the saloon of morning sunshine. As may well be conceived, therefore, there was material enough to supply, not merely a joyous evening, but also a happy lifetime, to more than as many people as that spacious apartment could contain. The company seemed to renew their youth; while that pattern and proverbial standard of innocence, the Child Unborn, frolicked to and fro among them, communicating his own unwrinkled gayety to all who had the good fortune to witness his gambols.

"My honored friends," said the Man of Fancy, after they had enjoyed themselves awhile, "I am now to request your presence in the banqueting-hall, where a slight collation is awaiting you."

"Ah, well said!" ejaculated a cadaverous figure, who had been invited for no other reason than that he was pretty constantly in the habit of dining with Duke Humphrey. "I was beginning to wonder whether a castle in the air were provided with a kitchen."

It was curious, in truth, to see how instantaneously the guests were diverted from the high moral enjoyments which they had been tasting with so much apparent zest by a suggestion of the more solid as well as liquid delights of the festive board. They thronged eagerly in the rear of the host, who now ushered them into a lofty and extensive hall, from end to end of which was arranged a table, glittering all over with innumerable dishes and drinking-vessels of gold. It is an uncertain point whether these rich articles of plate were made for the occasion out of molten sunbeams, or recovered from the wrecks of Spanish galleons that had lain for ages at the bottom of the sea. The upper end of the table was overshadowed by a canopy, beneath which was placed a chair of elaborate magnificence, which the host himself declined to occupy, and besought his guests to assign it to the worthiest among them. As a suitable homage to his incalculable antiquity and eminent distinction, the post of honor was at first tendered to the Oldest Inhabitant. He, however, eschewed it, and requested the favor of a bowl of gruel at a side table, where he could refresh himself with a quiet nap. There was some little hesitation as to the next candidate, until Posterity took the Master Genius of our country by the hand and led him to the chair of state beneath the princely canopy. When once they beheld him in his true place, the company acknowledged the justice of the selection by a long thunder-roll of vehement applause.

Then was served up a banquet, combining, if not all the delicacies of the season, yet all the rarities which careful purveyors had met with in the flesh, fish, and vegetable markets of the land of Nowhere. The bill of fare being unfortunately lost, we can only mention a phoenix, roasted in its own flames, cold potted birds of paradise, ice-creams from the Milky-Way, and whip syllabubs and flummery from the Paradise of Fools, whereof there was a very great consumption. As for drinkables, the temperance people contented themselves with water as usual; but it was the water of the Fountain of Youth; the ladies sipped Nepenthe; the lovelorn, the careworn, and the sorrow-stricken were supplied with brimming goblets of Lethe; and it was shrewdly conjectured that a certain golden vase, from which only the more distinguished guests were invited to partake, contained nectar that had been mellowing ever since the days of classical mythology. The cloth being removed, the company, as usual, grew eloquent over their liquor and delivered themselves of a succession of brilliant speeches,—the task of reporting which we resign to the more adequate ability of Counsellor Gill, whose indispensable co-operation the Man of Fancy had taken the precaution to secure.

When the festivity of the banquet was at its most ethereal point, the Clerk of the Weather was observed to steal from the table and thrust his head between the purple and golden curtains of one of the windows.

"My fellow-guests," he remarked aloud, after carefully noting the signs of the night, "I advise such of you as live at a distance to be going as soon as possible; for a thunder-storm is certainly at hand."

"Mercy on me!" cried Mother Carey, who had left her brood of chickens and come hither in gossamer drapery, with pink silk stockings. "How shall I ever get home?"

All now was confusion and hasty departure, with but little superfluous leave-taking. The Oldest Inhabitant, however, true to the rule of those long past days in which his courtesy had been studied, paused on the threshold of the meteor-lighted hall to express his vast satisfaction at the entertainment.

"Never, within my memory," observed the gracious old gentleman, "has it been my good fortune to spend a pleasanter evening or in more select society."

The wind here took his breath away, whirled his three-cornered hat into infinite space, and drowned what further compliments it had been his purpose to bestow. Many of the company had bespoken will-o'-the-wisps to convoy them home; and the host, in his general beneficence, had engaged the Man in the Moon, with an immense horn-lantern, to be the guide of such desolate spinsters as could do no better for themselves. But a blast of the rising tempest blew out all their lights in the twinkling of an eye. How, in the darkness that ensued, the guests contrived to get back to earth, or whether the greater part of them contrived to get back at all, or are still wandering among clouds, mists, and puffs of tempestuous wind, bruised by the beams and rafters of the overthrown castle in the air, and deluded by all sorts of unrealities, are points that concern themselves much more than the writer or the public. People should think of these matters before they trust themselves on a pleasure-party into the realm of Nowhere.

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