

# HAWTHORNE NATHANIEL

FRAGMENTS FROM THE  
JOURNAL OF A SOLITARY  
MAN

Nathaniel Hawthorne

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Journal of a Solitary Man**

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# Содержание

I	5
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	8

# **Nathaniel Hawthorne**

## **Fragments from the Journal of a Solitary Man / (From: «The Doliver Romance and Other Pieces: Tales and Sketches»)**

### **I**

My poor friend “Oberon” – [See the sketch or story entitled “The Devil in Manuscript,” in “The Snow-Image, and other Twice-Told Tales.”] – for let me be allowed to distinguish him by so quaint a name – sleeps with the silent 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 ebbed away, and the noon 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 sank 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 anybody that holds any commerce with his fellowmen 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 bookstore, 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 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 anything 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 burdened 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 all 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 prostrated, 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, – which 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 had 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 a dreamy 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 eyebrows 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 maid, 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.

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