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NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

THE House OF THE Seven Gables

COMPLETE
AND UNABRIDGED

with an introduction by DAVID G. PITT

**THE
HOUSE
OF THE
SEVEN GABLES**

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

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ISBN: 0-8049-0016-7 THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES

THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES



Nathaniel Hawthorne

Introduction

Most young readers make the acquaintance of Nathaniel Hawthorne as the reteller for children of the great myths of the past in *The Wonder Book* and *Tanglewood Tales*. When they are a little older they meet him as the author of such tales as "The Snow Image" and "The Great Stone Face." If so, most readers before they ever come to open the longer works of Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Blithedale Romance*, and *The House of the Seven Gables*, have already discovered the marvelous skill and lasting charm of a great storyteller. They have discovered that for the unusual in event and action, and for the interesting and memorable in human character, combined, in the non-mythical tales at least, with a deep concern for the moral implications of character and action, Nathaniel Hawthorne has few equals in the realm of the shorter narrative. If they go on to read his longer works, as they are almost certain to do, they will find that while his aims are larger and his range of subject matter broader, the gifts that make him a first-class storyteller are all employed with the same skill and charm. For Hawthorne, moralist and allegorist though he often is, thought of himself primarily and always as a storyteller. For this reason, though our vision of man as a moral being is enlarged and clarified by reading a work like *The Scarlet Letter* or *The House of*

the Seven Gables, what is most likely to remain with us are the stories themselves and the people who are the doers and sufferers in them.

In his own Preface to the first edition of *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne describes the book as a *romance*, rather than a *novel*. He goes on to distinguish between these two literary forms by stating that whereas the novel "is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience," the romance is allowed to present "the truth of the human heart . . . under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation." On the subject of his own romance, he continues, "The point of view in which this tale comes under the romantic definition lies in the attempt to connect a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away from us. It is a legend, prolonging itself, from an epoch now gray in the distance down into our own broad daylight, and bringing along with it some of the legendary mist. . . ." This, then, indicates both the form and the matter of *The House of the Seven Gables*. Whatever preconceived notions one may have of what constitutes a romance, or whether or not one believes that there is a real distinction between *novel* and *romance*, the general nature and intention of Hawthorne's book—as a narrative—are invitingly suggested by this brief characterization of the author's.

But Hawthorne is not yet finished; the story must have a moral. For he is writing in a time when the notion was still very much alive that a good story told for its own sake was not enough to justify the telling. Every tale ought to have a moral theme. And so he writes, "Not to be deficient in this particular, the author has provided himself with a moral—the truth, namely, that the wrongdoing of one generation lives into the successive ones, and, divesting itself of every temporary advantage, becomes a pure and uncontrollable mischief. . . ." And yet he knows, he confesses, that it is highly improbable that romances often produce any direct moral result, and so, rather than "impale the story with its moral, as with an iron rod," he prefers to let it work its influence by more subtle means.

The strong moral overtones of *The House of the Seven Gables* must be obvious to every reader. Yet it can probably

be said that no other, conceived in the terms to which Hawthorne himself admitted, succeeds so well in subduing a conscious moral theme to the overriding demands of a tale that moves unequivocally on the cloud-veiled plateau of romance, and seldom if ever descends to "the actual soil of the County of Essex," Massachusetts. This is not to say that Hawthorne wholly abandons the strong ethical bias that is so much a part of the very spirit of, say, *The Scarlet Letter*. But it is to say that in the work we have here, Hawthorne the Romantic greatly overshadows Hawthorne the Moralist and Allegorist; that Hawthorne the contemporary of Edgar Allan Poe here emerges from Hawthorne the descendant of Puritan forebears.

That he was the inheritor of a strong Puritan tradition, which left its imprint on the society into which he was born, and on the literary milieu in which he wrote, was always present to his mind and imagination, even when he permitted himself to indulge his romantic inclinations. His father, a sea captain, was a descendant of that redoubtable Puritan, Major William Hathorne (Nathaniel added *w* to the family name), who came to New England in 1630 and remained to fight Indians and persecute Quakers. Other ancestors included a judge, who participated in some of the infamous witchcraft trials of the seventeenth century, and who, according to tradition, had a curse called down upon him as a consequence. In him, we probably have the original of Colonel Pyncheon, the builder of the House of the Seven Gables, upon whose head old Matthew Maule, about to be hanged on the Colonel's charge of witchcraft, uttered the curse that haunted the House and its inhabitants for so long.

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born into a family of such traditions on July 4, 1804, in Salem, Massachusetts. His father, the sea captain, died abroad when the future author was only four years old. Fortunately, the boy's uncle provided for his education, which ended with his graduation from Bowdoin College in 1825. In the years that immediately followed he traveled and read, tried his hand at writing, and took a post for two years at the Boston Custom House. Leaving this job, he married Miss Sophia Peabody and settled at the Old Manse in Concord. Here he wrote his autobiographical *Mosses from an Old Manse*, which was published in 1846. In this year also, he became surveyor at the Salem Custom

House, continuing to write in his free time. Losing this post through political interference by others in 1849, he began to devote most of his time to writing, and in 1850 published *The Scarlet Letter*, which brought him immediate recognition. Thereafter came other works that added to his fame if not his fortune: *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), *The Snow Image and Other Twice-Told Tales* (1851), *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), *The Wonder Book* (1852), and *Tanglewood Tales* (1853). Two years spent in Italy as consul led to the writing of *The Marble Faun* (1860). Many other lesser-known works also came from his pen. He died at Plymouth, N. H., in 1864, having already secured a permanent place among the great American writers of the nineteenth century.

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January, 1963

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PREFACE

by the Author

When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume had he professed to be writing a Novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience. The former—while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart—has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation. If he think fit, also, he may so manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture. He will be wise, no doubt, to make a very moderate use of the privileges here stated, and, especially, to mingle the Marvelous rather as a slight, delicate, and evanescent flavor than as any portion of the actual substance of the dish offered to the public. He can hardly be said, however, to commit a literary crime even if he disregard this caution.

In the present work, the author has proposed to himself—but with what success, fortunately, it is not for him to judge—to keep undeviatingly within his immunities. The point of view in which this tale comes under the Romantic definition lies in the attempt to connect a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away from us. It is a legend prolonging itself, from an epoch now gray in the distance, down into our own broad daylight, and bringing along with it some of its legendary mist, which the reader, according to his pleasure, may either disregard, or allow it to float almost imperceptibly about the characters and events for the

sake of a picturesque effect. The narrative, it may be, is woven of so humble a texture as to require this advantage, and, at the same time, to render it the more difficult of attainment.

Many writers lay very great stress upon some definite moral purpose, at which they profess to aim their works. Not to be deficient in this particular, the author has provided himself with a moral—the truth, namely, that the wrongdoing of one generation lives into the successive ones, and, divesting itself of every temporary advantage, becomes a pure and uncontrollable mischief; and he would feel it a singular gratification if this romance might effectually convince mankind—or, indeed, any one man—of the folly of tumbling down an avalanche of ill-gotten gold, or real estate, on the heads of an unfortunate posterity, thereby to maim and crush them, until the accumulated mass shall be scattered abroad in its original atoms. In good faith, however, he is not sufficiently imaginative to flatter himself with the slightest hope of this kind. When romances do really teach anything, or produce any effective operation, it is usually through a far more subtle process than the ostensible one. The author has considered it hardly worth his while, therefore, relentlessly to impale the story with its moral as with an iron rod—or, rather, as by sticking a pin through a butterfly—thus at once depriving it of life, and causing it to stiffen in an ungainly and unnatural attitude. A high truth, indeed, fairly, finely, and skillfully wrought out, brightening at every step, and crowning the final development of a work of fiction, may add an artistic glory, but is never any truer, and seldom any more evident, at the last page than at the first.

The reader may perhaps choose to assign an actual locality to the imaginary events of this narrative. If permitted by the historical connection—which, though slight, was essential to his plan—the author would very willingly have avoided anything of this nature. Not to speak of other objections, it exposes the romance to an inflexible and exceedingly dangerous species of criticism, by bringing his fancy pictures almost into positive contact with the realities of the moment. It has been no part of his object, however, to describe local manners, nor in any way to meddle with the characteristics of a community for whom he cherishes a

proper respect and a natural regard. He trusts not to be considered as unpardonably offending by laying out a street that infringes upon nobody's private rights, and appropriating a lot of land which had no visible owner, and building a house of materials long in use for constructing castles in the air. The personages of the tale—though they give themselves out to be of ancient stability and considerable prominence—are really of the author's own making, or, at all events, of his own mixing; their virtues can shed no luster, nor their defects redound, in the remotest degree, to the discredit of the venerable town of which they profess to be inhabitants. He would be glad, therefore, if—especially in the quarter to which he alludes—the book may be read strictly as a Romance, having a great deal more to do with the clouds overhead than with any portion of the actual soil of the County of Essex.

Lenox, January 27, 1851

1. *The Old Pyncheon Family*

Halfway down a bystreet of one of our New England towns stands a rusty wooden house, with seven acutely peaked gables, facing towards various points of the compass, and a huge, clustered chimney in the midst. The street is Pyncheon Street; the house is the old Pyncheon House; and an elm tree, of wide circumference, rooted before the door, is familiar to every townborn child by the title of the Pyncheon Elm. On my occasional visits to the town aforesaid, I seldom failed to turn down Pyncheon Street, for the sake of passing through the shadow of these two antiquities—the great elm tree and the weather-beaten edifice.

The aspect of the venerable mansion has always affected me like a human countenance, bearing the traces not merely of outward storm and sunshine, but expressive, also, of the long lapse of mortal life, and accompanying vicissitudes that have passed within. Were these to be worthily recounted, they would form a narrative of no small interest and instruction, and possessing, moreover, a certain remarkable unity, which might almost seem the result of artistic arrangement. But the story would include a chain of events extending over the better part of two centuries, and, written out with reasonable amplitude, would fill a bigger folio volume, or a longer series of duodecimos, than could prudently be appropriated to the annals of all New England during a similar period. It consequently becomes imperative to make short work with most of the traditional lore of which the old Pyncheon House, otherwise known as the House of the Seven Gables, has been the theme. With a brief sketch, therefore, of the circumstances amid which the foundation of the house was laid, and a rapid glimpse at its quaint exterior, as it grew black in the prevalent east wind—pointing, too, here and there, at some spot of more ver-

dant mossiness on its roof and walls—we shall commence the real action of our tale at an epoch not very remote from the present day. Still, there will be a connection with the long past—a reference to forgotten events and personages, and to manners, feelings, and opinions, almost or wholly obsolete—which, if adequately translated to the reader, would serve to illustrate how much of old material goes to make up the freshest novelty of human life. Hence, too, might be drawn a weighty lesson from the little-regarded truth that the act of the passing generation is the germ which may and must produce good or evil fruit in a far-distant time; that together with the seed of the merely temporary crop, which mortals term expediency, they inevitably sow the acorns of a more enduring growth, which may darkly overshadow their posterity.

The House of the Seven Gables, antique as it now looks, was not the first habitation erected by civilized man on precisely the same spot of ground. Pyncheon Street formerly bore the humbler appellation of Maule's Lane, from the name of the original occupant of the soil, before whose cottage door it was a cowpath. A natural spring of soft and pleasant water—a rare treasure on the sea-girt peninsula, where the Puritan settlement was made—had early induced Matthew Maule to build a hut, shaggy with thatch, at this point, although somewhat too remote from what was then the center of the village. In the growth of the town, however, after some thirty or forty years, the site covered by this rude hovel had become exceedingly desirable in the eyes of a prominent and powerful personage, who asserted plausible claims to the proprietorship of this, and a large adjacent tract of land, on the strength of a grant from the legislature. Colonel Pyncheon, the claimant, as we gather from whatever traits of him are preserved, was characterized by an iron energy of purpose. Matthew Maule, on the other hand, though an obscure man, was stubborn in the defense of what he considered his right; and, for several years, he succeeded in protecting the acre or two of earth which, with his own toil, he had hewn out of the primeval forest, to be his garden ground and homestead. No written record of this dispute is known to be in existence. Our acquaintance with the whole subject is derived chiefly from tradition. It would be bold, therefore, and possibly unjust,

to venture a decisive opinion as to its merits; although it appears to have been at least a matter of doubt whether Colonel Pyncheon's claim were not unduly stretched, in order to make it cover the small metes and bounds of Matthew Maule. What greatly strengthens such a suspicion is the fact that this controversy between two ill-matched antagonists—at a period, moreover, laud it as we may, when personal influence had far more weight than now—remained for years undecided, and came to a close only with the death of the party occupying the disputed soil. The mode of his death, too, affects the mind differently, in our day, from what it did a century and a half ago. It was a death that blasted with strange horror the humble name of the dweller in the cottage, and made it seem almost a religious act to drive the plow over the little area of his habitation, and obliterate his place and memory from among men.

Old Matthew Maule, in a word, was executed for the crime of witchcraft. He was one of the martyrs to that terrible delusion, which should teach us, among its other morals, that the influential classes, and those who take upon themselves to be leaders of the people, are fully liable to all the passionate error that has ever characterized the maddest mob. Clergymen, judges, statesmen—the wisest, calmest, holiest persons of their day—stood in the inner circle round about the gallows, loudest to applaud the work of blood, latest to confess themselves miserably deceived. If any one part of their proceedings can be said to deserve less blame than another, it was the singular indiscriminate with which they persecuted not merely the poor and aged, as in former judicial massacres, but people of all ranks; their own equals, brethren, and wives. Amid the disorder of such various ruin, it is not strange that a man of inconsiderable note, like Maule, should have trodden the martyr's path of the hill of execution almost unremarked in the throng of his fellow sufferers. But, in after days, when the frenzy of that hideous epoch had subsided, it was remembered how loudly Colonel Pyncheon had joined in the general cry, to purge the land from witchcraft; nor did it fail to be whispered that there was an invidious acrimony in the zeal with which he had sought the condemnation of Matthew Maule. It was well known that the victim had recognized the bitterness of personal enmity in his prose-

cutor's conduct towards him, and that he declared himself hunted to death for his spoil. At the moment of execution—with the halter about his neck, and while Colonel Pyncheon sat on horseback, grimly gazing at the scene—Maule had addressed him from the scaffold, and uttered a prophecy, of which history, as well as fireside tradition, has preserved the very words. "God," said the dying man, pointing his finger, with a ghastly look, at the undismayed countenance of his enemy, "God will give him blood to drink!"

After the reputed wizard's death, his humble homestead had fallen an easy spoil into Colonel Pyncheon's grasp. When it was understood, however, that the Colonel intended to erect a family mansion—spacious, ponderously framed of oaken timber, and calculated to endure for many generations of his posterity—over the spot first covered by the log-built hut of Matthew Maule, there was much shaking of the head among the village gossips. Without absolutely expressing a doubt whether the stalwart Puritan had acted as a man of conscience and integrity throughout the proceedings which have been sketched, they, nevertheless, hinted that he was about to build his house over an unquiet grave. His home would include the home of the dead and buried wizard, and would thus afford the ghost of the latter a kind of privilege to haunt its new apartments, and the chambers into which future bridegrooms were to lead their brides, and where children of the Pyncheon blood were to be born. The terror and ugliness of Maule's crime, and the wretchedness of his punishment, would darken the freshly plastered walls, and infect them early with the scent of an old and melancholy house. Why, then—while so much of the soil around him was bestrewn with the virgin forest leaves—why should Colonel Pyncheon prefer a site that had already been accursed?

But the Puritan soldier and magistrate was not a man to be turned aside from his well-considered scheme, either by dread of the wizard's ghost or by flimsy sentimentalities of any kind, however specious. Had he been told of a bad air, it might have moved him somewhat; but he was ready to encounter an evil spirit on his own ground. Endowed with common sense, as massive and hard as blocks of granite, fastened together by stern rigidity of purpose, as with iron