

Monsieur du Miroir

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MOSSES FROM AN OLD MANSE

By Nathaniel Hawthorne

MONSIEUR DU MIROIR

Than the gentleman above named, there is nobody, in the whole circle of my acquaintance, whom I have more attentively studied, yet of whom I have less real knowledge, beneath the surface which it pleases him to present. Being anxious to discover who and what he really is, and how connected with me, and what are to be the results to him and to myself of the joint interest which, without any choice on my part, seems to be permanently established between us, and incited, furthermore, by the propensities of a student of human nature, though doubtful whether Monsieur du Miroir have aught of humanity but the figure,—I have determined to place a few of his remarkable points before the public, hoping to be favored with some clew to the explanation of his character. Nor let the reader condemn any part of the narrative as frivolous, since a subject of such grave reflection diffuses its importance through the minutest particulars; and there is no judging beforehand what odd little circumstance may do the office of a blind man's dog among the perplexities of this dark investigation; and however extraordinary, marvellous, preternatural, and utterly incredible some of the meditated disclosures may appear, I pledge my honor to maintain as sacred a regard to fact as if my testimony were given on oath and involved the dearest interests of the personage in question. Not that there is matter for a criminal accusation against Monsieur du Miroir, nor am I the man to bring it forward if there were. The chief that I complain of is his impenetrable mystery, which is no better than nonsense if it conceal anything good, and much worse in the contrary case.

But, if undue partialities could be supposed to influence me, Monsieur du Miroir might hope to profit rather than to suffer by them, for in the whole of our long intercourse we have seldom had the slightest disagreement; and, moreover, there are reasons for supposing him a near relative of mine, and consequently entitled to the best word that I can give him. He bears indisputably a strong personal resemblance to myself, and generally puts on mourning at the funerals of the family. On the other hand, his name would indicate a French descent; in which case, infinitely preferring that my blood should flow from a bold British and pure Puritan source, I beg leave to disclaim all kindred with Monsieur du Miroir. Some genealogists trace his origin to Spain, and dub him a knight of the order of the CABALLEROS DE LOS ESPEJOZ, one of whom was overthrown by Don Quixote. But what says Monsieur du Miroir himself of his paternity and his fatherland? Not a word did he ever say about the matter; and herein, perhaps, lies one of his most especial reasons for maintaining such a vexatious mystery, that he lacks the faculty of speech to expound it. His lips are sometimes seen to move; his eyes and countenance are alive with shifting expression, as if corresponding by visible hieroglyphics to his modulated breath; and anon he will seem to pause with as satisfied an air as if he had been talking excellent sense. Good sense or bad, Monsieur du Miroir is the sole judge of his own conversational powers, never having whispered so much as a syllable that reached the ears of any other auditor. Is he really dumb? or is all the world deaf? or is it merely a piece of my friend's waggery, meant for nothing but to make fools of us? If so, he has the joke all to himself.

This dumb devil which possesses Monsieur du Miroir is, I am persuaded, the sole reason that he does not make me the most flattering protestations of friendship. In many particulars—indeed, as to all his cognizable and not preternatural points, except that, once in a great while, I speak a word or two—there exists the greatest apparent sympathy between us. Such is his confidence in my taste that he goes astray from the general fashion and copies all his dresses after mine. I never try on a new garment without expecting to meet, Monsieur du Miroir in one of the same pattern. He has duplicates of all my waistcoats and cravats, shirt-bosoms of precisely a similar plait, and an old coat for private wear, manufactured, I suspect, by a Chinese tailor, in exact imitation of a beloved old coat of mine, with a facsimile, stitch by stitch, of a patch upon the elbow. In truth, the singular and minute coincidences that occur, both in the accidents of the passing day and the serious events of our lives, remind me of those doubtful legends of lovers, or twin children, twins of fate, who have lived, enjoyed, suffered, and died in unison, each faithfully repeating the last tremor of the other's breath, though separated by vast tracts of sea and land. Strange to say, my incommodities belong equally to my companion, though the burden is nowise alleviated by his participation. The other morning, after a night of torment from the toothache, I met Monsieur du Miroir with such a swollen anguish in his cheek that my own pangs were redoubled, as were also his, if I might judge by a fresh contortion of his visage. All the inequalities of my spirits are communicated to him, causing the unfortunate Monsieur du Miroir to mope and scowl through a whole summer's day, or to laugh as long, for no better reason than the gay or gloomy crotchets of my brain. Once we were joint sufferers of a three months' sickness, and met like mutual ghosts in the first days of convalescence. Whenever I have been in love, Monsieur du Miroir has looked passionate and tender; and never did my mistress discard me, but this too susceptible gentleman grew lackadaisical. His temper, also, rises to blood heat, fever heat, or boiling-water beat, according to the measure of any wrong which might seem to have fallen entirely on myself. I have sometimes been calmed down by the sight of my own inordinate wrath depicted on his frowning brow. Yet, however prompt in taking up my quarrels, I cannot call to mind that he ever struck a downright blow in my behalf; nor, in fact, do I perceive that any real and tangible good has resulted from his constant interference in my affairs; so that, in my distrustful moods, I am apt to suspect Monsieur du Miroir's sympathy to be mere outward show, not a whit better nor worse than other people's sympathy. Nevertheless, as mortal man must have something in the guise of sympathy,—and whether the true metal, or merely copper-washed, is of less moment,—I choose rather to content myself with Monsieur du Miroir's, such as it is, than to seek the sterling coin, and perhaps miss even the counterfeit.

In my age of vanities I have often seen him in the ballroom, and might again were I to seek him there. We have encountered each other at the Tremont Theatre, where, however, he took his seat neither in the dress-circle, pit, nor upper regions, nor threw a single glance at the stage, though the brightest star, even Fanny Kemble herself, might be culminating there. No; this whimsical friend of mine chose to linger in the saloon, near one of the large looking-glasses which throw back their pictures of the illuminated room. He is so full of these unaccountable eccentricities that I never like to notice Monsieur du Miroir, nor to acknowledge the slightest connection with him, in places of public resort. He, however, has no scruple about claiming my acquaintance, even when his common-sense, if he had any, might teach him that I would as willingly exchange a nod with the Old Nick. It was

but the other day that he got into a large brass kettle at the entrance of a hardware-store, and thrust his head, the moment afterwards, into a bright, new warming-pan, whence he gave me a most merciless look of recognition. He smiled, and so did I; but these childish tricks make decent people rather shy of Monsieur du Miroir, and subject him to more dead cuts than any other gentleman in town.

One of this singular person's most remarkable peculiarities is his fondness for water, wherein he excels any temperance man whatever. His pleasure, it must be owned, is not so much to drink it (in which respect a very moderate quantity will answer his occasions) as to souse himself over head and ears wherever he may meet with it. Perhaps he is a merman, or born of a mermaid's marriage with a mortal, and thus amphibious by hereditary right, like the children which the old river deities, or nymphs of fountains, gave to earthly love. When no cleaner bathing-place happened to be at hand, I have seen the foolish fellow in a horse-pond. Some times he refreshes himself in the trough of a town-pump, without caring what the people think about him. Often, while carefully picking my way along the street after a heavy shower, I have been scandalized to see Monsieur du Miroir, in full dress, paddling from one mud-puddle to another, and plunging into the filthy depths of each. Seldom have I peeped into a well without discerning this ridiculous gentleman at the bottom, whence he gazes up, as through a long telescopic tube, and probably makes discoveries among the stars by daylight. Wandering along lonesome paths or in pathless forests, when I have come to virgin fountains of which it would have been pleasant to deem myself the first discoverer, I have started to find Monsieur du Miroir there before me. The solitude seemed lonelier for his presence. I have leaned from a precipice that frowns over Lake George, which the French call nature's font of sacramental water, and used it in their log-churches here and their cathedrals beyond the sea, and seen him far below in that pure element. At Niagara, too, where I would gladly have forgotten both myself and him, I could not help observing my companion in the smooth water on the very verge of the cataract just above the Table Rock. Were I to reach the sources of the Nile, I should expect to meet him there. Unless he be another Ladurlad, whose garments the depth of ocean could not moisten, it is difficult to conceive how he keeps himself in any decent pickle; though I am bound to confess that his clothes seem always as dry and comfortable as my own. But, as a friend, I could wish that he would not so often expose himself in liquor.

All that I have hitherto related may be classed among those little personal oddities which agreeably diversify the surface of society, and, though they may sometimes annoy us, yet keep our daily intercourse fresher and livelier than if they were done away. By an occasional hint, however, I have endeavored to pave the way for stranger things to come, which, had they been disclosed at once, Monsieur du Miroir might have been deemed a shadow, and myself a person of no veracity, and this truthful history a fabulous legend. But, now that the reader knows me worthy of his confidence, I will begin to make him stare.

To speak frankly, then, I could bring the most astounding proofs that Monsieur du Miroir is at least a conjurer, if not one of that unearthly tribe with whom conjurers deal. He has inscrutable methods of conveying himself from place to place with the rapidity of the swiftest steamboat or rail-car. Brick walls and oaken doors and iron bolts are no impediment to his passage. Here in my chamber, for instance, as the evening deepens into

night, I sit alone,—the key turned and withdrawn from the lock, the keyhole stuffed with paper to keep out a peevish little blast of wind. Yet, lonely as I seem, were I to lift one of the lamps and step five paces eastward, Monsieur du Miroir would be sure to meet me with a lamp also in his hand; and were I to take the stage-coach to-morrow, without giving him the least hint of my design, and post onward till the week's end, at whatever hotel I might find myself I should expect to share my private apartment with this inevitable Monsieur du Miroir. Or, out of a mere wayward fantasy, were I to go, by moonlight, and stand beside the stone Pout of the Shaker Spring at Canterbury, Monsieur du Miroir would set forth on the same fool's errand, and would not fail to meet me there. Shall I heighten the reader's wonder? While writing these latter sentences, I happened to glance towards the large, round globe of one off the brass andirons, and lo! a miniature apparition of Monsieur du Miroir, with his face widened and grotesquely contorted, as if he were making fun of my amazement! But he has played so many of these jokes that they begin to lose their effect. Once, presumptuous that he was, he stole into the heaven of a young lady's eyes; so that, while I gazed and was dreaming only of herself, I found him also in my dream. Years have so changed him since that he need never hope to enter those heavenly orbs again.

From these veritable statements it will be readily concluded that, had Monsieur du Miroir played such pranks in old witch times, matters might have gone hard with him; at least if the constable and posse comitatus could have executed a warrant, or the jailer had been cunning enough to keep him. But it has often occurred to me as a very singular circumstance, and as betokening either a temperament morbidly suspicious or some weighty cause of apprehension, that he never trusts himself within the grasp even of his most intimate friend. If you step forward to meet him, he readily advances; if you offer him your hand, he extends his own with an air of the utmost frankness; but, though you calculate upon a hearty shake, you do not get hold of his little finger. Ah, this Monsieur du Miroir is a slippery fellow!

These truly are matters of special admiration. After vainly endeavoring, by the strenuous exertion of my own wits, to gain a satisfactory insight into the character of Monsieur du Miroir, I had recourse to certain wise men, and also to books of abstruse philosophy, seeking who it was that haunted me, and why. I heard long lectures and read huge volumes with little profit beyond the knowledge that many former instances are recorded, in successive ages, of similar connections between ordinary mortals and beings possessing the attributes of Monsieur du Miroir. Some now alive, perhaps, besides myself, have such attendants. Would that Monsieur du Miroir could be persuaded to transfer his attachment to one of those, and allow some other of his race to assume the situation that he now holds in regard to me! If I must needs have so intrusive an intimate, who stares me in the face in my closest privacy, and follows me even to my bedchamber, I should prefer—scandal apart—the laughing bloom of a young girl to the dark and bearded gravity of my present companion. But such desires are never to be gratified. Though the members of Monsieur du Miroir's family have been accused, perhaps justly, of visiting their friends often in splendid halls, and seldom in darksome dungeons, yet they exhibit a rare constancy to the objects of their first attachment, however unlovely in person or unamiable in disposition,—however unfortunate, or even infamous, and deserted by all the world besides. So will it be with my associate. Our fates appear inseparably blended. It is

my belief, as I find him mingling with my earliest recollections, that we came into existence together, as my shadow follows me into the sunshine, and that hereafter, as heretofore, the brightness or gloom of my fortunes will shine upon, or darken, the face of Monsieur du Miroir. As we have been young together, and as it is now near the summer noon with both of us, so, if long life be granted, shall each count his own wrinkles on the other's brow and his white hairs on the other's head. And when the coffin-lid shall have closed over me and that face and form, which, more truly than the lover swears it to his beloved, are the sole light of his existence,—when they shall be laid in that dark chamber, whither his swift and secret footsteps cannot bring him,—then what is to become of poor Monsieur du Miroir? Will he have the fortitude, with my other friends, to take a last look at my pale countenance? Will he walk foremost in the funeral train? Will he come often and haunt around my grave, and weed away the nettles, and plant flowers amid the verdure, and scrape the moss out of the letters of my burial-stone? Will he linger where I have lived, to remind the neglectful world of one who staked much to win a name, but will not then care whether he lost or won?

Not thus will he prove his deep fidelity. O, what terror, if this friend of mine, after our last farewell, should step into the crowded street, or roam along our old frequented path by the still waters, or sit down in the domestic circle where our faces are most familiar and beloved! No; but when the rays of heaven shall bless me no more, nor the thoughtful lamplight gleam upon my studies, nor the cheerful fireside gladden the meditative man, then, his task fulfilled, shall this mysterious being vanish from the earth forever. He will pass to the dark realm of nothingness, but will not find me there.

There is something fearful in bearing such a relation to a creature so imperfectly known, and in the idea that, to a certain extent, all which concerns myself will be reflected in its consequences upon him. When we feel that another is to share the self-same fortune with ourselves we judge more severely of our prospects, and withhold our confidence from that delusive magic which appears to shed an infallibility of happiness over our own pathway. Of late years, indeed, there has been much to sadden my intercourse with Monsieur de Miroir. Had not our union been a necessary condition of our life, we must have been estranged ere now. In early youth, when my affections were warm and free, I loved him well, and could always spend a pleasant hour in his society, chiefly because it gave me an excellent opinion of myself. Speechless as he was, Monsieur du Miroir had then a most agreeable way of calling me a handsome fellow; and I, of course, returned the compliment; so that, the more we kept each other's company, the greater coxcombs we mutually grew. But neither of us need apprehend any such misfortune now. When we chance to meet,—for it is chance oftener than design,—each glances sadly at the other's forehead, dreading wrinkles there; and at our temples, whence the hair is thinning away too early; and at the sunken eyes, which no longer shed a gladsome light over the whole face. I involuntarily peruse him as a record of my heavy youth, which has been wasted in sluggishness for lack of hope and impulse, or equally thrown away in toil that had no wise motive and has accomplished no good end. I perceive that the tranquil gloom of a disappointed soul has darkened through his countenance, where the blackness of the future seems to mingle with the shadows of the past, giving him the aspect of a fated man. Is it too wild a thought that my fate may have assumed this image of myself, and therefore haunts me with such inevitable pertinacity, originating every act which it appears to

imitate, while it deludes me by pretending to share the events of which it is merely the emblem and the prophecy? I must banish this idea, or it will throw too deep an awe round my companion. At our next meeting, especially if it be at midnight or in solitude, I fear that I shall glance aside and shudder; in which case, as Monsieur du Miroir is extremely sensitive to ill-treatment, he also will avert his eyes and express horror or disgust.

But no; this is unworthy of me. As of old I sought his society for the bewitching dreams of woman's love which he inspired, and because I fancied a bright fortune in his aspect, so now will I hold daily and long communion with him for the sake of the stern lessons that he will teach my manhood. With folded arms we will sit face to face, and lengthen out our silent converse till a wiser cheerfulness shall have been wrought from the very texture of despondency. He will say, perhaps indignantly, that it befits only him to mourn for the decay of outward grace, which, while he possessed it, was his all. But have not you, he will ask, a treasure in reserve, to which every year may add far more value than age or death itself can snatch from that miserable clay? He will tell me that though the bloom of life has been nipped with a frost, yet the soul must not sit shivering in its cell, but bestir itself manfully, and kindle a genial warmth from its own exercise against the autumnal and the wintry atmosphere. And I, in return, will bid him be of good cheer, nor take it amiss that I must blanch his locks and wrinkle him up like a wilted apple, since it shall be my endeavor so to beautify his face with intellect and mild benevolence that he shall profit immensely by the change. But here a smile will glimmer somewhat sadly over Monsieur du Miroir's visage.

When this subject shall have been sufficiently discussed we may take up others as important. Reflecting upon his power of following me to the remotest regions and into the deepest privacy, I will compare the attempt to escape him to the hopeless race that men sometimes run with memory, or their own hearts, or their moral selves, which, though burdened with cares enough to crush an elephant, will never be one step behind. I will be self-contemplative, as nature bids me, and make him the picture or visible type of what I muse upon, that my mind may not wander so vaguely as heretofore, chasing its own shadow through a chaos and catching only the monsters that abide there. Then will we turn our thoughts to the spiritual world, of the reality of which my companions shall furnish me an illustration, if not an argument; for, as we have only the testimony of the eye to Monsieur du Miroir's existence, while all the other senses would fail to inform us that such a figure stands within arm's-length, wherefore should there not be beings innumerable close beside us, and filling heaven and earth with their multitude, yet of whom no corporeal perception can take cognizance? A blind man might as reasonably deny that Monsieur du Miroir exists, as we, because the Creator has hitherto withheld the spiritual perception, can therefore contend that there are no spirits. O, there are! And, at this moment, when the subject of which I write has grown strong within me and surrounded itself with those solemn and awful associations which might have seemed most alien to it, I could fancy that Monsieur du Miroir himself is a wanderer from the spiritual world, with nothing human except his delusive garment of visibility. Methinks I should tremble now were his wizard power of gliding through all impediments in search of me to place him suddenly before my eyes.

Ha! What is yonder? Shape of mystery, did the tremor of my heartstrings vibrate to thine own, and call thee from thy home among the dancers of the northern lights, and

shadows flung from departed sunshine, and giant spectres that appear on clouds at daybreak and affright the climber of the Alps? In truth it startled me, as I threw a wary glance eastward across the chamber, to discern an unbidden guest with his eyes bent on mine. The identical MONSIEUR DU MIROIR! Still there he sits and returns my gaze with as much of awe and curiosity as if he, too, had spent a solitary evening in fantastic musings and made me his theme. So inimitably does he counterfeit that I could almost doubt which of us is the visionary form, or whether each be not the other's mystery, and both twin brethren of one fate, in mutually reflected spheres. O friend, canst thou not hear and answer me? Break down the barrier between us! Grasp my hand! Speak! Listen! A few words, perhaps, might satisfy the feverish yearning of my soul for some master-thought that should guide me through this labyrinth of life, teaching wherefore I was born, and how to do my task on earth, and what is death. Alas! Even that unreal image should forget to ape me and smile at these vain questions. Thus do mortals deify, as it were, a mere shadow of themselves, a spectre of human reason, and ask of that to unveil the mysteries which Divine Intelligence has revealed so far as needful to our guidance, and hid the rest.

Farewell, Monsieur du Miroir. Of you, perhaps, as of many men, it may be doubted whether you are the wiser, though your whole business is REFLECTION.