

The Intelligence Office

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MOSSES FROM AN OLD MANSE

By Nathaniel Hawthorne

THE INTELLIGENCE OFFICE

Grave figure, with a pair of mysterious spectacles on his nose and a pen behind his ear, was seated at a desk in the corner of a metropolitan office. The apartment was fitted up with a counter, and furnished with an oaken cabinet and a Chair or two, in simple and business-like style. Around the walls were stuck advertisements of articles lost, or articles wanted, or articles to be disposed of; in one or another of which classes were comprehended nearly all the Conveniences, or otherwise, that the imagination of man has contrived. The interior of the room was thrown into shadow, partly by the tall edifices that rose on the opposite side of the street, and partly by the immense show-bills of blue and crimson paper that were expanded over each of the three windows. Undisturbed by the tramp of feet, the rattle of wheels, the hump of voices, the shout of the city crier, the scream of the newsboys, and other tokens of the multitudinous life that surged along in front of the office, the figure at the desk pored diligently over a folio volume, of ledger-like size and aspect. He looked like the spirit of a record—the soul of his own great volume made visible in mortal shape.

But scarcely an instant elapsed without the appearance at the door of some individual from the busy population whose vicinity was manifested by so much buzz, and clatter, and outcry. Now, it was a thriving mechanic in quest of a tenement that should come within his moderate means of rent; now, a ruddy Irish girl from the banks of Killarney, wandering from kitchen to kitchen of our land, while her heart still hung in the peat-smoke of her native cottage; now, a single gentleman looking out for economical board; and now—for this establishment offered an epitome of worldly pursuits—it was a faded beauty inquiring for her lost bloom; or Peter Schlemihl, for his lost shadow; or an author of ten years' standing, for his vanished reputation; or a moody man, for yesterday's sunshine.

At the next lifting of the latch there entered a person with his hat awry upon his head, his clothes perversely ill-suited to his form, his eyes staring in directions opposite to their intelligence, and a certain odd unsuitableness pervading his whole figure. Wherever he might chance to be, whether in palace or cottage, church or market, on land or sea, or even at his own fireside, he must have worn the characteristic expression of a man out of his right place.

"This," inquired he, putting his question in the form of an assertion,—“this is the Central Intelligence Office?”

"Even so," answered the figure at the desk, turning another leaf of his volume; he then looked the applicant in the face and said briefly, "Your business?"

"I want," said the latter, with tremulous earnestness, "a place!"

"A place! and of what nature?" asked the Intelligencer. "There are many vacant, or soon to be so, some of which will probably suit, since they range from that of a footman up to a seat at the council-board, or in the cabinet, or a throne, or a presidential chair."

The stranger stood pondering before the desk with an unquiet, dissatisfied air,—a dull, vague pain of heart, expressed by a slight contortion of the brow,—an earnestness of glance, that asked and expected, yet continually wavered, as if distrusting. In short, he evidently wanted, not in a physical or intellectual sense, but with an urgent moral necessity that is the hardest of all things to satisfy, since it knows not its own object.

“Ah, you mistake me!” said he at length, with a gesture of nervous impatience. “Either of the places you mention, indeed, might answer my purpose; or, more probably, none of them. I want my place! my own place! my true place in the world! my proper sphere! my thing to do, which Nature intended me to perform when she fashioned me thus awry, and which I have vainly sought all my lifetime! Whether it be a footman’s duty or a king’s is of little consequence, so it be naturally mine. Can you help me here?”

“I will enter your application,” answered the Intelligencer, at the same time writing a few lines in his volume. “But to undertake such a business, I tell you frankly, is quite apart from the ground covered by my official duties. Ask for something specific, and it may doubtless be negotiated for you, on your compliance with the conditions. But were I to go further, I should have the whole population of the city upon my shoulders; since far the greater proportion of them are, more or less, in your predicament.”

The applicant sank into a fit of despondency, and passed out of the door without again lifting his eyes; and, if he died of the disappointment, he was probably buried in the wrong tomb, inasmuch as the fatality of such people never deserts them, and, whether alive or dead, they are invariably out of place.

Almost immediately another foot was heard on the threshold. A youth entered hastily, and threw a glance around the office to ascertain whether the man of intelligence was alone. He then approached close to the desk, blushed like a maiden, and seemed at a loss how to broach his business.

“You come upon an affair of the heart,” said the official personage, looking into him through his mysterious spectacles. “State it in as few words as may be.”

“You are right,” replied the youth. “I have a heart to dispose of.”

“You seek an exchange?” said the Intelligencer. “Foolish youth, why not be contented with your own?”

“Because,” exclaimed the young man, losing his embarrassment in a passionate glow,—“because my heart burns me with an intolerable fire; it tortures me all day long with yearnings for I know not what, and feverish throbbings, and the pangs of a vague sorrow; and it awakens me in the night-time with a quake, when there is nothing to be feared. I cannot endure it any longer. It were wiser to throw away such a heart, even if it brings me nothing in return.”

“O, very well,” said the man of office, making an entry in his volume. “Your affair will be easily transacted. This species of brokerage makes no inconsiderable part of my business; and there is always a large assortment of the article to select from. Here, if I mistake not, comes a pretty fair sample.”

Even as he spoke the door was gently and slowly thrust ajar, affording a glimpse of the slender figure of a young girl, who, as she timidly entered, seemed to bring the light and

cheerfulness of the outer atmosphere into the somewhat gloomy apartment. We know not her errand there, nor can we reveal whether the young man gave up his heart into her custody. If so, the arrangement was neither better nor worse than in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, where the parallel sensibilities of a similar age, importunate affections, and the easy satisfaction of characters not deeply conscious of themselves, supply the place of any profounder sympathy.

Not always, however, was the agency of the passions and affections an office of so little trouble. It happened, rarely, indeed, in proportion to the cases that came under an ordinary rule, but still it did happen, that a heart was occasionally brought hither of such exquisite material, so delicately attuned, and so curiously wrought, that no other heart could be found to match it. It might almost be considered a misfortune, in a worldly point of view, to be the possessor of such a diamond of the purest water; since in any reasonable probability it could only be exchanged for an ordinary pebble, or a bit of cunningly manufactured glass, or, at least, for a jewel of native richness, but ill-set, or with some fatal flaw, or an earthy vein running through its central lustre. To choose another figure, it is sad that hearts which have their wellspring in the infinite, and contain inexhaustible sympathies, should ever be doomed to pour themselves into shallow vessels, and thus lavish their rich affections on the ground. Strange that the finer and deeper nature, whether in man or woman, while possessed of every other delicate instinct, should so often lack that most invaluable one of preserving itself from contamination with what is of a baser kind! Sometimes, it is true, the spiritual fountain is kept pure by a wisdom within itself, and sparkles into the light of heaven without a stain from the earthy strata through which it had gushed upward. And sometimes, even here on earth, the pure mingles with the pure, and the inexhaustible is recompensed with the infinite. But these miracles, though he should claim the credit of them, are far beyond the scope of such a superficial agent in human affairs as the figure in the mysterious spectacles.

Again the door was opened, admitting the bustle of the city with a fresher reverberation into the Intelligence Office. Now entered a man of woe-begone and downcast look; it was such an aspect as if he had lost the very soul out of his body, and had traversed all the world over, searching in the dust of the highways, and along the shady footpaths, and beneath the leaves of the forest, and among the sands of the sea-shore, in hopes to recover it again. He had bent an anxious glance along the pavement of the street as he came hitherward; he looked also in the angle of the doorstep, and upon the floor of the room; and, finally, coming up to the Man of Intelligence, he gazed through the inscrutable spectacles which the latter wore, as if the lost treasure might be hidden within his eyes.

“I have lost—” he began; and then he paused.

“Yes,” said the Intelligencer, “I see that you have lost,—but what?”

“I have lost a precious jewel!” replied the unfortunate person, “the like of which is not to be found among any prince’s treasures. While I possessed it, the contemplation of it was my sole and sufficient happiness. No price should have purchased it of me; but it has fallen from my bosom where I wore it in my careless wanderings about the city.”

After causing the stranger to describe the marks of his lost jewel, the Intelligencer opened a drawer of the oaken cabinet which has been mentioned as forming a part of the

furniture of the room. Here were deposited whatever articles had been picked up in the streets, until the right owners should claim them. It was a strange and heterogeneous collection. Not the least remarkable part of it was a great number of wedding-rings, each one of which had been riveted upon the finger with holy vows, and all the mystic potency that the most solemn rites could attain, but had, nevertheless, proved too slippery for the wearer's vigilance. The gold of some was worn thin, betokening the attrition of years of wedlock; others, glittering from the jeweller's shop, must have been lost within the honeymoon. There were ivory tablets, the leaves scribbled over with sentiments that had been the deepest truths of the writer's earlier years, but which were now quite obliterated from his memory. So scrupulously were articles preserved in this depository, that not even withered flowers were rejected; white roses, and blush-roses, and moss-roses, fit emblems of virgin purity and shamefacedness, which had been lost or flung away, and trampled into the pollution of the streets; locks of hair,—the golden and the glossy dark,—the long tresses of woman and the crisp curls of man, signified that lovers were now and then so heedless of the faith intrusted to them as to drop its symbol from the treasure-place of the bosom. Many of these things were imbued with perfumes, and perhaps a sweet scent had departed from the lives of their former possessors ever since they had so wilfully or negligently lost them. Here were gold pencil-cases, little ruby hearts with golden arrows through them, bosom-pins, pieces of coin, and small articles of every description, comprising nearly all that have been lost since a long time ago. Most of them, doubtless, had a history and a meaning, if there were time to search it out and room to tell it. Whoever has missed anything valuable, whether out of his heart, mind, or pocket, would do well to make inquiry at the Central Intelligence Office.

And in the corner of one of the drawers of the oaken cabinet, after considerable research, was found a great pearl, looking like the soul of celestial purity, congealed and polished.

"There is my jewel! my very pearl!" cried the stranger, almost beside himself with rapture. "It is mine! Give it me this moment! or I shall perish!"

"I perceive," said the Man of Intelligence, examining it more closely, "that this is the Pearl of Great Price!"

"The very same," answered the stranger. "Judge, then, of my misery at losing it out of my bosom! Restore it to me! I must not live without it an instant to longer."

"Pardon me," rejoined the Intelligencer, calmly, "you ask what is beyond my duty. This pearl, as you well know, is held upon a peculiar tenure; and having once let it escape from your keeping, you have no greater claim to it—nay, not so great—as any other person. I cannot give it back."

Nor could the entreaties of the miserable man—who saw before his eyes the jewel of his life without the power to reclaim it—soften the heart of this stern being, impassive to human sympathy, though exercising such an apparent influence over human fortunes. Finally the loser of the inestimable pearl clutched his hands among his hair, and ran madly forth into the world, which was affrighted at his desperate looks. There passed him on the doorstep a fashionable young gentleman, whose business was to inquire for a damask rosebud, the gift of his lady-love, which he had lost out of his buttonhole within a hour

after receiving it. So various were the errands of those who visited this Central Office, where all human wishes seemed to be made known, and, so far as destiny would allow, negotiated to their fulfilment.

The next that entered was a man beyond the middle age, bearing the look of one who knew the world and his own course in it. He had just alighted from a handsome private carriage, which had orders to wait in the street while its owner transacted his business. This person came up to the desk with a quick, determined step, and looked the Intelligencer in the face with a resolute eye; though, at the same time, some secret trouble gleamed from it in red and dusky light.

“I have an estate to dispose of,” said he, with a brevity that seemed characteristic.

“Describe it,” said the Intelligencer.

The applicant proceeded to give the boundaries of his property, its nature, comprising tillage, pasture, woodland, and pleasure-grounds, in ample circuit; together with a mansion-house, in the construction of which it had been his object to realize a castle in the air, hardening its shadowy walls into granite, and rendering its visionary splendor perceptible to the awakened eye. Judging from his description, it was beautiful enough to vanish like a dream, yet substantial enough to endure for centuries. He spoke, too, of the gorgeous furniture, the refinements of upholstery, and all the luxurious artifices that combined to render this a residence where life might flow onward in a stream of golden days, undisturbed by the ruggedness which fate loves to fling into it.

“I am a man of strong will,” said he, in conclusion; “and at my first setting out in life, as a poor, unfriended youth, I resolved to make myself the possessor of such a mansion and estate as this, together with the abundant revenue necessary to uphold it. I have succeeded to the extent of my utmost wish. And this is the estate which I have now concluded to dispose of.”

“And your terms?” asked the Intelligencer, after taking down the particulars with which the stranger had supplied him.

“Easy, abundantly easy!” answered the successful man, smiling, but with a stern and almost frightful contraction of the brow, as if to quell an inward pang. “I have been engaged in various sorts of business,—a distiller, a trader to Africa, an East India merchant, a speculator in the stocks,—and, in the course of these affairs, have contracted an encumbrance of a certain nature. The purchaser of the estate shall merely be required to assume this burden to himself.”

“I understand you,” said the Man of Intelligence, putting his pen behind his ear. “I fear that no bargain can be negotiated on these conditions. Very probably the next possessor may acquire the estate with a similar encumbrance, but it will be of his own contracting, and will not lighten your burden in the least.”

“And am I to live on,” fiercely exclaimed the stranger, “with the dirt of these accursed acres and the granite of this infernal mansion crushing down my soul? How, if I should turn the edifice into an almshouse or a hospital, or tear it down and build a church?”

“You can at least make the experiment,” said the Intelligencer; “but the whole matter is one which you must settle for yourself.”

The man of deplorable success withdrew, and got into his coach, which rattled off lightly over the wooden pavements, though laden with the weight of much land, a stately house, and ponderous heaps of gold, all compressed into an evil conscience.

There now appeared many applicants for places; among the most noteworthy of whom was a small, smoke-dried figure, who gave himself out to be one of the bad spirits that had waited upon Dr. Faustus in his laboratory. He pretended to show a certificate of character, which, he averred, had been given him by that famous necromancer, and countersigned by several masters whom he had subsequently served.

“I am afraid, my good friend,” observed the Intelligencer, “that your chance of getting a service is but poor. Nowadays, men act the evil spirit for themselves and their neighbors, and play the part more effectually than ninety-nine out of a hundred of your fraternity.”

But, just as the poor fiend was assuming a vaporous consistency, being about to vanish through the floor in sad disappointment and chagrin, the editor of a political newspaper chanced to enter the office in quest of a scribbler of party paragraphs. The former servant of Dr. Faustus, with some misgivings as to his sufficiency of venom, was allowed to try his hand in this capacity. Next appeared, likewise seeking a service, the mysterious man in Red, who had aided Bonaparte in his ascent to imperial power. He was examined as to his qualifications by an aspiring politician, but finally rejected, as lacking familiarity with the cunning tactics of the present day.

People continued to succeed each other with as much briskness as if everybody turned aside, out of the roar and tumult of the city, to record here some want, or superfluity, or desire. Some had goods or possessions, of which they wished to negotiate the sale. A China merchant had lost his health by a long residence in that wasting climate. He very liberally offered his disease, and his wealth along with it, to any physician who would rid him of both together. A soldier offered his wreath of laurels for as good a leg as that which it had cost him on the battle-field. One poor weary wretch desired nothing but to be accommodated with any creditable method of laying down his life; for misfortune and pecuniary troubles had so subdued his spirits that he could no longer conceive the possibility of happiness, nor had the heart to try for it. Nevertheless, happening to overhear some conversation in the Intelligence Office respecting wealth to be rapidly accumulated by a certain mode of speculation, he resolved to live out this one other experiment of better fortune. Many persons desired to exchange their youthful vices for others better suited to the gravity of advancing age; a few, we are glad to say, made earnest efforts to exchange vice for virtue, and, hard as the bargain was, succeeded in effecting it. But it was remarkable that what all were the least willing to give up, even on the most advantageous terms, were the habits, the oddities, the characteristic traits, the little ridiculous indulgences, somewhere between faults and follies, of which nobody but themselves could understand the fascination.

The great folio, in which the Man of Intelligence recorded all these freaks of idle hearts, and aspirations of deep hearts, and desperate longings of miserable hearts, and evil prayers of perverted hearts, would be curious reading were it possible to obtain it for publication. Human character in its individual developments—human nature in the mass—may best be studied in its wishes; and this was the record of them all. There was an endless diversity of mode and circumstance, yet withal such a similarity in the real groundwork, that any one

page of the volume—whether written in the days before the Flood, or the yesterday that is just gone by, or to be written on the morrow that is close at hand, or a thousand ages hence—might serve as a specimen of the whole. Not but that there were wild sallies of fantasy that could scarcely occur to more than one man's brain, whether reasonable or lunatic. The strangest wishes—yet most incident to men who had gone deep into scientific pursuits, and attained a high intellectual stage, though not the loftiest—were, to contend with Nature, and wrest from her some secret, or some power, which she had seen fit to withhold from mortal grasp. She loves to delude her aspiring students, and mock them with mysteries that seem but just beyond their utmost reach. To concoct new minerals, to produce new forms of vegetable life, to create an insect, if nothing higher in the living scale, is a sort of wish that has often revelled in the breast of a man of science. An astronomer, who lived far more among the distant worlds of space than in this lower sphere, recorded a wish to behold the opposite side of the moon, which, unless the system of the firmament be reversed, she can never turn towards the earth. On the same page of the volume was written the wish of a little child to have the stars for playthings.

The most ordinary wish, that was written down with wearisome recurrence, was, of course, for wealth, wealth, wealth, in sums from a few shillings up to unreckonable thousands. But in reality this often-repeated expression covered as many different desires. Wealth is the golden essence of the outward world, embodying almost everything that exists beyond the limits of the soul; and therefore it is the natural yearning for the life in the midst of which we find ourselves, and of which gold is the condition of enjoyment, that men abridge into this general wish. Here and there, it is true, the volume testified to some heart so perverted as to desire gold for its own sake. Many wished for power; a strange desire indeed, since it is but another form of slavery. Old people wished for the delights of youth; a fop for a fashionable coat; an idle reader, for a new novel; a versifier, for a rhyme to some stubborn word; a painter, for Titian's secret of coloring; a prince, for a cottage; a republican, for a kingdom and a palace; a libertine, for his neighbor's wife; a man of palate, for green peas; and a poor man, for a crust of bread. The ambitious desires of public men, elsewhere so craftily concealed, were here expressed openly and boldly, side by side with the unselfish wishes of the philanthropist for the welfare of the race, so beautiful, so comforting, in contrast with the egotism that continually weighed self against the world. Into the darker secrets of the Book of Wishes we will not penetrate.

It would be an instructive employment for a student of mankind, perusing this volume carefully and comparing its records with men's perfected designs, as expressed in their deeds and daily life, to ascertain how far the one accorded with the other. Undoubtedly, in most cases, the correspondence would be found remote. The holy and generous wish, that rises like incense from a pure heart towards heaven, often lavishes its sweet perfume on the blast of evil times. The foul, selfish, murderous wish, that steams forth from a corrupted heart, often passes into the spiritual atmosphere without being concreted into an earthly deed. Yet this volume is probably truer, as a representation of the human heart, than is the living drama of action as it evolves around us. There is more of good and more of evil in it; more redeeming points of the bad and more errors of the virtuous; higher upsoarings, and baser degradation of the soul; in short, a more perplexing amalgamation of vice and virtue than we witness in the outward world. Decency and external conscience often produce a far fairer outside than is warranted by the stains within. And be it owned,

oil the other hand, that a man seldom repeats to his nearest friend, any more than he realizes in act, the purest wishes, which, at some blessed time or other, have arisen from the depths of his nature and witnessed for him in this volume. Yet there is enough on every leaf to make the good man shudder for his own wild and idle wishes, as well as for the sinner, whose whole life is the incarnation of a wicked desire.

But again the door is opened, and we hear the tumultuous stir of the world,—a deep and awful sound, expressing in another form some portion of what is written in the volume that lies before the Man of Intelligence. A grandfatherly personage tottered hastily into the office, with such an earnestness in his infirm alacrity that his white hair floated backward as he hurried up to the desk, while his dim eyes caught a momentary lustre from his vehemence of purpose. This venerable figure explained that he was in search of To-morrow.

“I have spent all my life in pursuit of it,” added the sage old gentleman, “being assured that To-morrow has some vast benefit or other in store for me. But I am now getting a little in years, and must make haste; for, unless I overtake To-morrow soon, I begin to be afraid it will finally escape me.”

“This fugitive To-morrow, my venerable friend,” said the Man of Intelligence, “is a stray child of Time, and is flying from his father into the region of the infinite. Continue your pursuit, and you will doubtless come up with him; but as to the earthly gifts which you expect, he has scattered them all among a throng of Yesterdays.”

Obliged to content himself with this enigmatical response, the grandsire hastened forth with a quick clatter of his staff upon the floor; and, as he disappeared, a little boy scampered through the door in chase of a butterfly which had got astray amid the barren sunshine of the city. Had the old gentleman been shrewder, he might have detected To-morrow under the semblance of that gaudy insect. The golden butterfly glistened through the shadowy apartment, and brushed its wings against the Book of Wishes, and fluttered forth again with the child still in pursuit.

A man now entered, in neglected attire, with the aspect of a thinker, but somewhat too rough-hewn and brawny for a scholar. His face was full of sturdy vigor, with some finer and keener attribute beneath. Though harsh at first, it was tempered with the glow of a large, warm heart, which had force enough to heat his powerful intellect through and through. He advanced to the Intelligencer and looked at him with a glance of such stern sincerity that perhaps few secrets were beyond its scope.

“I seek for Truth,” said he.

“It is precisely the most rare pursuit that has ever come under my cognizance,” replied the Intelligencer, as he made the new inscription in his volume. “Most men seek to impose some cunning falsehood upon themselves for truth. But I can lend no help to your researches. You must achieve the miracle for yourself. At some fortunate moment you may find Truth at your side, or perhaps she may be mistily discerned far in advance, or possibly behind you.”

“Not behind me,” said the seeker; “for I have left nothing on my track without a thorough investigation. She flits before me, passing now through a naked solitude, and now mingling with the throng of a popular assembly, and now writing with the pen of a

French philosopher, and now standing at the altar of an old cathedral, in the guise of a Catholic priest, performing the high mass. O weary search! But I must not falter; and surely my heart-deep quest of Truth shall avail at last.”

He paused and fixed his eyes upon the Intelligencer with a depth of investigation that seemed to hold commerce with the inner nature of this being, wholly regardless of his external development.

“And what are you?” said he. “It will not satisfy me to point to this fantastic show of an Intelligence Office and this mockery of business. Tell me what is beneath it, and what your real agency in life and your influence upon mankind.”

“Yours is a mind,” answered the Man of Intelligence, “before which the forms and fantasies that conceal the inner idea from the multitude vanish at once and leave the naked reality beneath. Know, then, the secret. My agency in worldly action, my connection with the press, and tumult, and intermingling, and development of human affairs, is merely delusive. The desire of man’s heart does for him whatever I seem to do. I am no minister of action, but the Recording Spirit.”

What further secrets were then spoken remains a mystery, inasmuch as the roar of the city, the bustle of human business, the outcry of the jostling masses, the rush and tumult of man’s life, in its noisy and brief career, arose so high that it drowned the words of these two talkers; and whether they stood talking in the moon, or in Vanity Fair, or in a city of this actual world, is more than I can say.