

Time's Portraiture

Nathaniel Hawthorne

From: *The Dolliver Romance and Other Pieces*
Houghton, Mifflin and Company, Boston, 1904

THE DOLIVER ROMANCE AND OTHER PIECES

TALES AND SKETCHES

By Nathaniel Hawthorne

TIME'S PORTRAITURE

Being the Carrier's Address to the Patrons of "The Salem Gazette" for the 1st of January, 1838.

ADDRESS.

Kind Patrons:—We newspaper carriers are Time's errand-boys; and all the year round, the old gentleman sends us from one of your doors to another, to let you know what he is talking about and what he is doing. We are a strange set of urchins; for, punctually on New Year's morning, one and all of us are seized with a fit of rhyme, and break forth in such hideous strains, that it would be no wonder if the infant Year, with her step upon the threshold, were frightened away by the discord with which we strive to welcome her. On these occasions, most generous patrons, you never fail to give us a taste of your bounty; but whether as a reward for our verses, or to purchase a respite from further infliction of them, is best known to your worshipful selves. Moreover, we, Time's errand-boys as aforesaid, feel it incumbent upon us, on the first day of every year, to present a sort of summary of our master's dealings with the world, throughout the whole of the preceding twelvemonth. Now it has so chanced by a misfortune heretofore unheard of, that I, your present petitioner, have been altogether forgotten by the Muse. Instead of being able (as I naturally expected) to measure my ideas into six-foot lilies, and tack a rhyme at each of their tails, I find myself, this blessed morning, the same simple proser that I was yesterday, and shall probably be to-morrow. And to my further mortification, being a humble-minded little sinner, I feel no wise capable of talking to your worships with the customary wisdom of my brethren, and giving sage opinions as to what Time has done right, and what he has done wrong, and what of right or wrong he means to do hereafter. Such being my unhappy predicament, it is with no small confusion of face, that I make bold to present myself at your doors. Yet it were surely a pity that my non-appearance should defeat your bountiful designs for the replenishing of my pockets. Wherefore I have bethought me, that it might not displease your worships to hear a few particulars about the person and habits of Father Time, with whom, as being one of his errand-boys, I have more acquaintance than most lads of my years.

For a great many years past, there has been a woodcut on the cover of the "Farmer's Almanac," pretending to be a portrait of Father Time. It represents that respectable personage as almost in a state of nudity, with a single lock of hair on his forehead, wings on his shoulders, and accoutred with a scythe and an hour-glass. These two latter symbols appear to betoken that the old fellow works in haying time, by the hour. But, within my recollection, Time has never carried a scythe and an hour-glass, nor worn a pair of wings, nor shown himself in the half-naked condition that the almanac would make us believe. Nowadays, he is the most fashionably dressed figure about town; and I take it to be his natural disposition, old as he is, to adopt every fashion of the day and of the hour. Just at the present period, you may meet him in a furred surtout, with pantaloons strapped under his narrow-toed boots; on his head, instead of a single forelock, he wears a smart auburn

wig, with bushy whiskers of the same hue, the whole surmounted by a German-lustre hat. He has exchanged his hour-glass for a gold patent-lever watch, which he carries in his vest-pocket; and as for his scythe, he has either thrown it aside altogether, or converted its handle into a cane not much stouter than a riding-switch. If you stare him full in the face, you will perhaps detect a few wrinkles; but, on a hasty glance, you might suppose him to be in the very heyday of life, as fresh as he was in the garden of Eden. So much for the present aspect of Time; but I by no means insure that the description shall suit him a month hence, or even at this hour tomorrow.

It is another very common mistake, to suppose that Time wanders among old ruins, and sits on mouldering walls and moss-grown stones, meditating about matters which everybody else has forgotten. Some people, perhaps, would expect to find him at the burial-ground in Broad Street, poring over the half-illegible inscriptions on the tombs of the Higginsons, the Hathornes,—[Not “Hawthorne,” as one of the present representatives of the family has seen fit to transmogrify a good old name.]—the Holyokes, the Brownes, the Olivers, the Pickmans, the Pickerings, and other worthies, with whom he kept company of old. Some would look for him on the ridge of Gallows Hill, where, in one of his darkest moods, he and Cotton Mather hung the witches. But they need not seek him there. Time is invariably the first to forget his own deeds, his own history, and his own former associates. His place is in the busiest bustle of the world. If you would meet Time face to face, you have only to promenade in Essex Street, between the hours of twelve and one; and there, among beaux and belles, you will see old Father Time, apparently the gayest of the gay. He walks arm in arm with the young men, talking about balls and theatres, and afternoon rides, and midnight merry-makings; he recommends such and such a fashionable tailor, and sneers at every garment of six months’ antiquity; and, generally, before parting, he invites his friends to drink champagne,—a wine in which Time delights, on account of its rapid effervescence. And Time treads lightly beside the fair girls, whispering to them (the old deceiver!) that they are the sweetest angels he ever was acquainted with. He tells them that they have nothing to do but dance and sing, and twine roses in their hair, and gather a train of lovers, and that the world will always be like an illuminated ball-room. And Time goes to the Commercial News-Room, and visits the insurance-offices, and stands at the corner of Essex and St. Peter’s Streets, talking with the merchants.

However, Time seldom has occasion to mention the gentleman’s name, so that it is no great matter how he spells or pronounces it about the arrival of ships, the rise and fall of stocks, the price of cotton and breadstuffs, the prospects of the whaling-business, and the cod-fishery, and all other news of the day. And the young gentlemen, and the pretty girls, and the merchants, and all others with whom he makes acquaintance, are apt to think that there is nobody like Time, and that Time is all in all.

But Time is not near so good a fellow as they take him for. He is continually on the watch for mischief, and often seizes a sly opportunity to lay his cane over the shoulders of some middle-aged gentleman; and lo and behold! the poor man’s back is bent, his hair turns gray, and his face looks like a shrivelled apple. This is what is meant by being “time-stricken.” It is the worst feature in Time’s character, that he always inflicts the greatest injuries on his oldest friends. Yet, shamefully as he treats them, they evince no desire to cut his acquaintance, and can seldom bear to think of a final separation.

Again, there is a very prevalent idea, that Time loves to sit by the fireside, telling stories of the Puritans, the witch persecutors, and the heroes of the old French war and the Revolution; and that he has no memory for anything more recent than the days of the first President Adams. This is another great mistake. Time is so eager to talk of novelties, that he never fails to give circulation to the most incredible rumors of the day, though at the hazard of being compelled to eat his own words to-morrow. He shows numberless instances of this propensity while the national elections are in progress. A month ago, his mouth was full of the wonderful Whig victories; and to do him justice, he really seems to have told the truth for once. Whether the same story will hold good another year, we must leave Time himself to show. He has a good deal to say, at the present juncture, concerning the revolutionary movements in Canada; he blusters a little about the northeastern boundary question; he expresses great impatience at the sluggishness of our commanders in the Florida war; he gets considerably excited whenever the subject of abolition is brought forward, and so much the more, as he appears hardly to have made up his mind on one side or the other. Whenever this happens to be the case,—as it often does,—Time works himself into such a rage, that you would think he were going to tear the universe to pieces; but I never yet knew him to proceed, in good earnest, to such terrible extremities. During the last six or seven months, he has been seized with intolerable sulkiness at the slightest mention of the currency; for nothing vexes Time so much as to be refused cash upon the nail. The above are the chief topics of general interest which Time is just now in the habit of discussing. For his more private gossip, he has rumors of new matches, of old ones broken off, with now and then a whisper of good-natured scandal; sometimes, too, he condescends to criticise a sermon, or a lyceum lecture, or performance of the glee-club; and, to be brief, catch the volatile essence of present talk and transitory opinions, and you will have Time's gossip, word for word. I may as well add, that he expresses great approbation of Mr. Russell's vocal abilities, and means to be present from beginning to end of his next concert. It is not every singer that could keep Time with his voice and instrument, for a whole evening. Perhaps you will inquire, "What are Time's literary tastes?" And here again there is a general mistake. It is conceived by many, that Time spends his leisure hours at the Athenaeum, turning over the musty leaves of those large worm-eaten folios, which nobody else has disturbed since the death of the venerable Dr. Oliver. So far from this being the case, Time's profoundest studies are the new novels from Messrs. Ives and Jewett's Circulating Library. He skims over the lighter articles in the periodicals of the day, glances at the newspapers, and then throws them aside forever, all except "The Salem Gazette," of which he preserves a file, for his amusement a century or two hence.

We will now consider Time as a man of business. In this capacity, our citizens are in the habit of complaining, not wholly without reason, that Time is sluggish and dull. You may see him occasionally at the end of Derby Wharf, leaning against a post, or sitting on the breech of an iron cannon, staring listlessly at an unrigged East Indiaman. Or, if you look through the windows of the Union Marine Insurance Office, you may get a glimpse of him there, nodding over a newspaper, among the old weather-beaten sea-captains who recollect when Time was quite a different sort of fellow. If you enter any of the dry-goods stores along Essex Street, you will be likely to find him with his elbows on the counter, bargaining for a yard of tape or a paper of pins. To catch him in his idlest mood, you must visit the office of some young lawyer. Still, however, Time does contrive to do a little

business among us, and should not be denied the credit of it. During the past season, he has worked pretty diligently upon the railroad, and promises to start the cars by the middle of next summer. Then we may fly from Essex Street to State Street, and be back again before Time misses us. In conjunction with our worthy mayor (with whose ancestor, the Lord Mayor of London, Time was well acquainted more than two hundred years ago) he has laid the corner-stone of a new city hall, the granite front of which is already an ornament to Court Street. But besides these public affairs, Time busies himself a good deal in private. Just at this season of the year, he is engaged in collecting bills, and may be seen at almost any hour peregrinating from street to street, and knocking at half the doors in town, with a great bundle of these infernal documents. On such errands he appears in the likeness of an undersized, portly old gentleman, with gray hair, a bluff red face, and a loud tone of voice; and many people mistake him for the penny-post.

Never does a marriage take place, but Time is present among the wedding-guests; for marriage is an affair in which Time takes more interest than in almost any other. He generally gives away the bride, and leads the bridegroom by the hand to the threshold of the bridal chamber. Although Time pretends to be very merry on these occasions, yet, if you watch him well, you may often detect a sigh. Whenever a babe is born into this weary world, Time is in attendance, and receives the wailing infant in his arms. And the poor babe shudders instinctively at his embrace, and sets up a feeble cry.

Then again, from the birth-chamber, he must hurry to the bedside of some old acquaintance, whose business with Time is ended forever, though their accounts remain to be settled at a future day. It is terrible, sometimes, to perceive the lingering reluctance, the shivering agony, with which the poor souls bid Time farewell, if they have gained no other friend to supply the gray deceiver's place. How do they cling to Time, and steal another and yet another glance at his familiar aspect! But Time, the hard-hearted old fellow! goes through such scenes with infinite composure, and dismisses his best friends from memory the moment they are out of sight. Others, who have not been too intimate with Time, as knowing him to be a dangerous character, and apt to ruin his associates,—these take leave of him with joy, and pass away with a look of triumph on their features. They know, that, in spite of all his flattering promises, he could not make them happy, but that now they shall be so, long after Time is dead and buried.

For Time is not immortal. Time must die, and be buried in the deep grave of eternity. And let him die. From the hour when he passed forth through the gate of Eden, till this very moment, he has gone to and fro about the earth, staining his hands with blood, committing crimes innumerable, and bringing misery on himself and all mankind. Sometimes he has been a pagan; sometimes a persecutor. Sometimes he has spent centuries in darkness, where he could neither read nor write. These were called the Dark Ages. There has hardly been a single year, when he has not stirred up strife among the nations. Sometimes, as in France less than fifty years ago, he has been seized with fits of frenzy, and murdered thousands of innocent people at noonday. He pretends, indeed, that he has grown wiser and better now. Trust him who will; for my part, I rejoice that Time shall not live forever. He hath an appointed office to perform. Let him do his task, and die. Fresh and young as he would make himself appear, he is already hoary with age; and the very garments that he wears about the town were put on thousands of years ago, and have been patched and pieced to suit the present fashion. There is nothing new in him nor about

him. Were he to die while I am speaking, we could not pronounce it an untimely death. Methinks, with his heavy heart and weary brain, Time should himself be glad to die.

Meanwhile, gentle patrons, as Time has brought round another New Year, pray remember your poor petitioner. For so small a lad, you will agree that I talk pretty passably well, and have fairly earned whatever spare specie Time has left in your pockets. Be kind to me; and I have good hope that Time will be kind to you. After all the hard things which I have said about him, he is really,—that is, if you take him for neither more nor less than he is worth, and use him as not abusing him,—Time is really a very tolerable old fellow, and may be endured for a little while that we are to keep him company. Be generous, kind patrons, to Time's errand-boy. So may he bring to the merchant his ship safe from the Indies; to the lawyer, a goodly number of new suits; to the doctor, a crowd of patients with the dyspepsia and fat purses; to the farmer, a golden crop and a ready market; to the mechanic, steady employment and good wages; to the idle gentleman, some honest business; to the rich, kind hearts and liberal hands; to the poor, warm firesides and food enough, patient spirits, and the hope of better days; to our country, a return of specie payments; and to you, sweet maid, the youth who stole into your dream last night! And next New Year's Day (if I find nothing better to do in the mean while) may Time again bring to your doors your loving little friend,

THE CARRIER.