

The House & of Seven Gables

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Chapter 5: May and November

PHOEBE PYNCHION slept, on the night of her arrival, in a chamber that looked down on the garden of the old house. It fronted towards the east, so that at a very seasonable hour a glow of crimson light came flooding through the window, and bathed the dingy ceiling and paper-hangings in its own hue. There were curtains to Phoebe's bed; a dark, antique canopy and ponderous festoons, of a stuff which had been rich, and even magnificent, in its time; but which now brooded over the girl like a cloud, making a night in that one corner, while elsewhere it was beginning to be day. The morning light, however, soon stole into the aperture at the foot of the bed, betwixt those faded curtains. Finding the new guest there, — with a bloom on her cheeks like the morning's own, and a gentle stir of departing slumber in her limbs, as when an early breeze moves the foliage, — the dawn kissed her brow. It was the caress which a dewy maiden — such as the Dawn is, immortally — gives to her sleeping sister, partly from the impulse of irresistible fondness, and partly as a pretty hint that it is time now to unclose her eyes.

At the touch of those lips of light, Phoebe quietly awoke, and, for a moment, did not recognize where she was, nor how those heavy curtains chanced to be festooned around her. Nothing, indeed, was absolutely plain to her, except that it was now early morning, and that, whatever might happen next, it was proper, first of all, to get up and say her prayers. She was the more inclined to devotion, from the grim aspect of the chamber and its furniture, especially the tall, stiff chairs; one of which stood close by her bedside, and looked as if some old-fashioned personage had been sitting there all night, and had vanished only just in season to escape discovery.

When Phoebe was quite dressed, she peeped out of the window, and saw a rose-bush in the garden. Being a very tall one, and of luxurious growth, it had been propped up against the side of the house, and was literally covered with a rare and very beautiful species of white rose. A large portion of them, as the girl afterwards discovered, had blight or mildew at their hearts; but, viewed at a fair distance, the whole rose-bush looked as if it had been brought from Eden



that very summer, together with the mould in which it grew. The truth was, nevertheless, that it had been planted by Alice Pyncheon, — she was Phoebe's great-great-grand-aunt, — in soil which, reckoning only its cultivation as a garden-plot, was now unctuous with nearly two hundred years of vegetable decay. Growing as they did, however, out of the old earth, the flowers still sent a fresh and sweet incense up to their Creator; nor could it have been the less pure and acceptable, because Phoebe's young breath mingled with it, as the fragrance floated past the window. Hastening down the creaking and carpetless staircase, she found her way into the garden, gathered some of the most perfect of the roses, and brought them to her chamber.

Little Phoebe was one of those persons who possess, as their exclusive patrimony, the gift of practical arrangement. It is a kind of natural magic that enables these favored ones to bring out the hidden capabilities of things around them; and particularly to give a look of comfort and habitableness to any place which, for however brief a period, may happen to be their home. A wild hut of underbrush, tossed together by wayfarers through the primitive forest, would acquire the home aspect by one night's lodging of such a woman, and would retain it long after her quiet figure had disappeared into the surrounding shade. No less a portion of such homely witchcraft was requisite, to reclaim, as it were, Phoebe's waste, cheerless, and dusky chamber, which had been untenanted so long — except by spiders, and mice, and rats, and ghosts — that it was all overgrown with the desolation which watches to obliterate every trace of man's happier hours. What was precisely Phoebe's process, we find it impossible to say. She appeared to have no preliminary design, but gave a touch here, and another there; brought some articles of furniture to light, and dragged others into the shadow; looped up or let down a window-curtain; and, in the course of half an hour, had fully succeeded in throwing a kindly and hospitable smile over the apartment. No longer ago than the night before, it had resembled nothing so much as the old maid's heart; for there was neither sunshine nor household-fire in one nor the other, and, save for ghosts and ghostly reminiscences, not a guest, for many years gone by, had entered the heart or the chamber.

There was still another peculiarity of this inscrutable charm. The bed-chamber, no doubt, was a chamber of very great and varied experience, as a scene of human life: the joy of bridal nights had throbbed itself away here; new immortals had first drawn earthly breath here; and here old people had died. But — whether it were the white roses, or whatever the subtile influence might be — a person of delicate instinct would have known, at once, that it was now a maiden's bed-chamber, and had been purified of all former evil and sorrow by her sweet breath and happy thoughts. Her dreams of the past night, being such cheerful ones, had exorcised the gloom, and now haunted the chamber in its stead.



After arranging matters to her satisfaction, Phoebe emerged from her chamber, with a purpose to descend again into the garden. Besides the rose-bush, she had observed several other species of flowers, growing there in a wilderness of neglect, and obstructing one another's development (as is often the parallel case in human society) by their uneducated entanglement and confusion. At the head of the stairs, however, she met Hepzibah, who, it being still early, invited her into a room which she would probably have called her boudoir, had her education embraced any such French phrase. It was strewn about with a few old books, and a work-basket, and a dusty writing-desk; and had, on one side, a large, black article of furniture, of very strange appearance, which the old gentlewoman told Phoebe was a harpsichord. It looked more like a coffin than anything else; and, indeed, — not having been played upon, or opened, for years, — there must have been a vast deal of dead music in it, stifled for want of air. Human finger was hardly known to have touched its chords since the days of Alice Pyncheon, who had learned the sweet accomplishment of melody in Europe.

Hepzibah bade her young guest sit down, and, herself taking a chair near by, looked as earnestly at Phoebe's trim little figure as if she expected to see right into its springs and motive secrets.

"Cousin Phoebe," said she, at last, "I really can't see my way clear to keep you with me."

These words, however, had not the inhospitable bluntness with which they may strike the reader; for the two relatives, in a talk before bedtime, had arrived at a certain degree of mutual understanding. Hepzibah knew enough to enable her to appreciate the circumstances (resulting from the second marriage of the girl's mother) which made it desirable for Phoebe to establish herself in another home. Nor did she misinterpret Phoebe's character, and the genial activity pervading it, — one of the most valuable traits of the true New England woman, — which had impelled her forth, as might be said, to seek her fortune, but with a self-respecting purpose to confer as much benefit as she could anywise receive. As one of her nearest kindred, she had naturally betaken herself to Hepzibah, with no idea of forcing herself on her cousin's protection, but only for a visit of a week or two, which might be indefinitely extended, should it prove for the happiness of both.

To Hepzibah's blunt observation, therefore, Phoebe replied, as frankly, and more cheerfully.

"Dear cousin, I cannot tell how it will be," said she. "But I really think we may suit one another much better than you suppose."

"You are a nice girl, — I see it plainly," continued Hepzibah; "and it is not any question as to that point which makes me hesitate. But, Phoebe, this house of mine is but a melancholy



place for a young person to be in. It lets in the wind and rain, and the snow, too, in the garret and upper chambers, in winter-time; but it never lets in the sunshine! And as for myself, you see what I am, — a dismal and lonesome old woman (for I begin to call myself old, Phoebe), whose temper, I am afraid, is none of the best, and whose spirits are as bad as can be. I cannot make your life pleasant, Cousin Phoebe, neither can I so much as give you bread to eat.”

“You will find me a cheerful little body,” answered Phoebe, smiling, and yet with a kind of gentle dignity; “and I mean to earn my bread. You know I have not been brought up a Pyncheon. A girl learns many things in a New England village.”

“Ah! Phoebe,” said Hepzibah, sighing, “your knowledge would do but little for you here! And then it is a wretched thought, that you should fling away your young days in a place like this. Those cheeks would not be so rosy, after a month or two. Look at my face!” — and, indeed, the contrast was very striking, — “you see how pale I am! It is my idea that the dust and continual decay of these old houses are unwholesome for the lungs.”

“There is the garden, — the flowers to be taken care of,” observed Phoebe. “I should keep myself healthy with exercise in the open air”

“And, after all, child,” exclaimed Hepzibah, suddenly rising, as if to dismiss the subject, “it is not for me to say who shall be a guest or inhabitant of the old Pyncheon-house. Its master is coming.”

“Do you mean Judge Pyncheon?” asked Phoebe, in surprise.

“Judge Pyncheon!” answered her cousin, angrily. “He will hardly cross the threshold while I live! No, no! But, Phoebe, you shall see the face of him I speak of.”

She went in quest of the miniature already described, and returned with it in her hand. Giving it to Phoebe, she watched her features narrowly, and with a certain jealousy as to the mode in which the girl would show herself affected by the picture.

“How do you like the face?” asked Hepzibah.

“It is handsome! — it is very beautiful!” said Phoebe, admiringly. “It is as sweet a face as a man’s can be, or ought to be. It has something of a child’s expression, — and yet not childish, — only, one feels so very kindly towards him! He ought never to suffer anything. One would bear much for the sake of sparing him toil or sorrow. Who is it, Cousin Hepzibah?”

“Did you never hear,” whispered her cousin, bending towards her, “of Clifford Pyncheon?”

“Never! I thought there were no Pyncheons left, except yourself and our cousin Jaffrey,” answered Phoebe. “And yet I seem to have heard the name of Clifford Pyncheon. Yes! — from my father, or my mother; but has he not been a long while dead?”



“Well, well, child, perhaps he has!” said Hepzibah, with a sad, hollow laugh; “but, in old houses like this, you know, dead people are very apt to come back again! We shall see. And, Cousin Phoebe, since, after all that I have said, your courage does not fail you, we will not part so soon. You are welcome, my child, for the present, to such a home as your kinswoman can offer you.

With this measured, but not exactly cold assurance of a hospitable purpose, Hepzibah kissed her cheek.

They now went below stairs, where Phoebe — not so much assuming the office as attracting it to herself, by the magnetism of innate fitness — took the most active part in preparing breakfast. The mistress of the house, meanwhile, as is usual with persons of her stiff and unmalleable cast, stood mostly aside; willing to lend her aid, yet conscious that her natural inaptitude would be likely to impede the business in hand. Phoebe, and the fire that boiled the teakettle, were equally bright, cheerful, and efficient, in their respective offices. Hepzibah gazed forth from her habitual sluggishness, the necessary result of long solitude, as from another sphere. She could not help being interested, however, and even amused, at the readiness with which her new inmate adapted herself to the circumstances, and brought the house, moreover, and all its rusty old appliances, into a suitableness for her purposes. Whatever she did, too, was done without conscious effort, and with frequent outbreaks of song, which were exceedingly pleasant to the ear. This natural tunefulness made Phoebe seem like a bird in a shadowy tree; or conveyed the idea that the stream of life warbled through her heart as a brook sometimes warbles through a pleasant little dell. It betokened the cheeriness of an active temperament, finding joy in its activity, and, therefore, rendering it beautiful; it was a New England trait, — the stern old stuff of Puritanism, with a gold thread in the web.

Hepzibah brought out some old silver spoons, with the family crest upon them, and a China tea-set, painted over with grotesque figures of man, bird, and beast, in as grotesque a landscape. These pictured people were odd humorists, in a world of their own, — a world of vivid brilliancy, so far as color went, and still unfaded, although the tea-pot and small cups were as ancient as the custom itself of tea-drinking.

“Your great-great-great-great-grandmother had these cups, when she was married,” said Hepzibah to Phoebe. “She was a Davenport, of a good family. They were almost the first tea-cups ever seen in the colony; and if one of them were to be broken, my heart would break with it. But it is nonsense to speak so about a brittle tea-cup, when I remember what my heart has gone through, without breaking.”



The cups — not having been used, perhaps, since Hepzibah's youth — had contracted no small burthen of dust, which Phoebe washed away with so much care and delicacy as to satisfy even the proprietor of this invaluable china.

“What a nice little housewife you are!” exclaimed the latter, smiling, and, at the same time, frowning so prodigiously that the smile was sunshine under a thundercloud. “Do you do other things as well? Are you as good at your book as you are at washing tea-cups?”

“Not quite, I am afraid,” said Phoebe, laughing at the form of Hepzibah's question. “But I was school-mistress for the little children in our district, last summer, and might have been so still.”

“Ah! 'tis all very well!” observed the maiden lady, drawing herself up. — “But these things must have come to you with your mother's blood. I never knew a Pyncheon that had any turn for them.”

It is very queer, but not the less true, that people are generally quite as vain, or even more so, of their deficiencies, than of their available gifts; as was Hepzibah of this native inapplicability, so to speak, of the Pyncheons, to any useful purpose. She regarded it as an hereditary trait; and so, perhaps, it was, but, unfortunately, a morbid one, such as is often generated in families that remain long above the surface of society.

Before they left the breakfast-table, the shop-bell rang sharply, and Hepzibah set down the remnant of her final cup of tea, with a look of sallow despair that was truly piteous to behold. In cases of distasteful occupation, the second day is generally worse than the first; we return to the rack with all the soreness of the preceding torture in our limbs. At all events, Hepzibah had fully satisfied herself of the impossibility of ever becoming wonted to this peevishly obstreperous little bell. Ring as often as it might, the sound always smote upon her nervous system rudely and suddenly. And especially now, while, with her crested tea-spoons and antique china, she was flattering herself with ideas of gentility, she felt an unspeakable disinclination to confront a customer.

“Do not trouble yourself, dear cousin!” cried Phoebe, starting lightly up. “I am shopkeeper today.”

“You, child!” exclaimed Hepzibah. “What can a little country-girl know of such matters?”

“Oh, I have done all the shopping for the family, at our village, store,” said Phoebe. “And I have had a table at a fancy fair, and made better sales than anybody. These things are not to be learnt; they depend upon a knack, that comes, I suppose,” added she, smiling, “with one's mother's blood. You shall see that I am as nice a little saleswoman as I am a housewife!”



The old gentlewoman stole behind Phoebe, and peeped from the passage-way into the shop, to note how she would manage her undertaking. It was a case of some intricacy. A very ancient woman, in a white short gown, and a green petticoat, with a string of gold beads about her neck, and what looked like a night-cap on her head, had brought a quantity of yarn to barter for the commodities of the shop. She was probably the very last person in town who still kept the time-honored spinning-wheel in constant revolution. It was worth while to hear the croaking and hollow tones of the old lady, and the pleasant voice of Phoebe, mingling in one twisted thread of talk; and still better, to contrast their figures, — so light and bloomy — so decrepit and dusky, — with only the counter betwixt them, in one sense, but more than threescore years, in another. As for the bargain, it was wrinkled slyness and craft pitted against native truth and sagacity.

“Was not that well done?” asked Phoebe, laughing, when the customer was gone.

“Nicely done, indeed, child!” answered Hepzibah. “I could not have gone through with it nearly so well. As you say, it must be a knack that belongs to you on the mother’s side.”

It is a very genuine admiration, that with which persons too shy or too awkward to take a due part in the bustling world regard the real actors in life’s stirring scenes; so genuine, in fact, that the former are usually fain to make it palatable to their self-love, by assuming that these active and forcible qualities are incompatible with others, which they choose to deem higher and more important. Thus, Hepzibah was well content to acknowledge Phoebe’s vastly superior gifts as a shopkeeper; she listened, with compliant ear, to her suggestion of various methods whereby the influx of trade might be increased, and rendered profitable, without a hazardous outlay of capital. She consented that the village maiden should manufacture yeast, both liquid and in cakes; and should brew a certain kind of beer, nectareous to the palate, and of rare stomachic virtues; and, moreover, should bake and exhibit for sale some little spice-cakes, which whosoever tasted would longingly desire to taste again. All such proofs of a ready mind, and skilful handiwork, were highly acceptable to the aristocratic hucksteress, so long as she could murmur to herself, with a grim smile, and a half-natural sigh, and a sentiment of mixed wonder, pity, and growing affection, —

“What a nice little body she is! If she could only be a lady, too! — but that’s impossible! Phoebe is no Pyncheon. She takes everything from her mother.”

As to Phoebe’s not being a lady, or whether she were a lady or no, it was a point, perhaps, difficult to decide, but which could hardly have come up for judgment at all, in any fair and healthy mind. Out of New England, it would be impossible to meet with a person combining so many ladylike attributes with so many others that form no necessary (if compatible) part of



the character. She shocked no canon of taste; she was admirably in keeping with herself, and never jarred against surrounding circumstances. Her figure, to be sure, — so small as to be almost childlike, and so elastic that motion seemed as easy or easier to it than rest, — would hardly have suited one's idea of a countess. Neither did her face — with the brown ringlets on either side, and the slightly piquant nose, and the wholesome bloom, and the clear shade of tan, and the half a dozen freckles, friendly remembrancers of the April sun and breeze — precisely give us a right to call her beautiful. But there was both lustre and depth in her eyes. She was very pretty; as graceful as a bird, and graceful much in the same way; as pleasant about the house as a gleam of sunshine falling on the floor through a shadow of twinkling leaves, or as a ray of firelight that dances on the wall, while evening is drawing nigh. Instead of discussing her claim to rank among ladies, it would be preferable to regard Phoebe as the example of feminine grace and availability combined, in a state of society, if there were any such, where ladies did not exist. There it should be woman's office to move in the midst of practical affairs, and to gild them all, the very homeliest, — were it even the scouring of pots and kettles, — with an atmosphere of loveliness and joy.

Such was the sphere of Phoebe. To find the born and educated lady, on the other hand, we need look no further than Hepzibah, our forlorn old maid, in her rustling and rusty silks, with her deeply-cherished and ridiculous consciousness of long descent, her shadowy claims to princely territory, and, in the way of accomplishment, her recollections, it may be, of having formerly thrummed on a harpsichord, and walked a minuet, and worked an antique tapestry-stitch on her sampler. It was a fair parallel between new Plebeianism and old Gentility.

It really seemed as if the battered visage of the House of the Seven Gables, black and heavy-browed as it still certainly looked, must have shown a kind of cheerfulness glimmering through its dusky windows, as Phoebe passed to and fro in the interior. Otherwise, it is impossible to explain how the people of the neighborhood so soon became aware of the girl's presence. There was a great run of custom, setting steadily in, from about ten o'clock until towards noon, — relaxing, somewhat, at dinner-time, but recommencing in the afternoon, and, finally, dying away a half an hour or so before the long day's sunset. One of the staunchest patrons was little Ned Higgins, the devourer of Jim Crow and the elephant, who to-day had signalized his omnivorous prowess by swallowing two dromedaries and a locomotive. Phoebe laughed, as she summed up her aggregate of sales upon the slate, while Hepzibah, first drawing on a pair of silk gloves, reckoned over the sordid accumulation of copper coin, not without silver intermixed, that had jingled into the till.



“We must renew our stock, Cousin Hepzibah!” cried the little saleswoman. “The gingerbread figures are all gone, and so are those Dutch wooden milkmaids, and most of our other playthings. There has been constant inquiry for cheap raisins, and a great cry for whistles, and trumpets, and Jew’s-harps; and at least a dozen little boys have asked for molasses-candy. And we must contrive to get a peck of russet apples, late in the season as it is. But, dear cousin, what an enormous heap of copper! Positively a copper mountain!”

“Well done! Well done! Well done!” quoth Uncle Venner, who had taken occasion to shuffle in and out of the shop several times, in the course of the day. “Here’s a girl that will never end her days at my farm! Bless my eyes, what a brisk little soul!”

“Yes, Phoebe is a nice girl!” said Hepzibah, with a scowl of austere approbation. “But, Uncle Venner, you have known the family a great many years. Can you tell me whether there ever was a Pyncheon whom she takes after?”

“I don’t believe there ever was,” answered the venerable man. “At any rate, it never was my luck to see her like among them, nor, for that matter, anywhere else. I’ve seen a great deal of the world, not only in people’s kitchens and back-yards, but at the street-corners, and on the wharves, and in other places where my business calls me; and I’m free to say, Miss Hepzibah, that I never knew a human creature do her work so much like one of God’s angels as this child Phoebe does!”

Uncle Venner’s eulogium, if it appear rather too high-strained for the person and occasion, had, nevertheless, a sense in which it was both subtle and true. There was a spiritual quality in Phoebe’s activity. The life of the long and busy day — spent in occupations that might so easily have taken a squalid and ugly aspect — had been made pleasant, and even lovely, by the spontaneous grace with which these homely duties seemed to bloom out of her character; so that labor, while she dealt with it, had the easy and flexible charm of play. Angels do not toil, but let their good works grow out of them; and so did Phoebe.

The two relatives — the young maid and the old one — found time, before nightfall, in the intervals of trade to make rapid advances towards affection and confidence. A recluse, like Hepzibah, usually displays remarkable frankness, and at least temporary affability, on being absolutely cornered, and brought to the point of personal intercourse; like the angel whom Jacob wrestled with, she is ready to bless you when once overcome.

The old gentlewoman took a dreary and proud satisfaction in leading Phoebe from room to room of the house, and recounting the traditions with which, as we may say, the walls were lugubriously frescoed. She showed the indentations made by the lieutenant-governor’s sword-hilt in the door-panels of the apartment where old Colonel Pyncheon, a dead host, had



received his affrighted visitors with an awful frown. The dusky terror of that frown, Hepzibah observed, was thought to be lingering ever since in the passageway. She bade Phoebe step into one of the tall chairs, and inspect the ancient map of the Pyncheon territory at the eastward. In a tract of land on which she laid her finger, there existed a silver mine, the locality of which was precisely pointed out in some memoranda of Colonel Pyncheon himself, but only to be made known when the family claim should be recognized by government. Thus it was for the interest of all New England that the Pyncheons should have justice done them. She told, too, how that there was undoubtedly an immense treasure of English guineas hidden somewhere about the house, or in the cellar, or possibly in the garden.

“If you should happen to find it, Phoebe,” said Hepzibah, glancing aside at her, with a grim yet kindly smile, “we will tie up the shop-bell for good and all!”

“Yes, dear cousin,” answered Phoebe; “but, in the mean time, I hear somebody ringing it!”

When the customer was gone, Hepzibah talked rather vaguely, and at great length, about a certain Alice Pyncheon, who had been exceedingly beautiful and accomplished in her lifetime, a hundred years ago. The fragrance of her rich and delightful character still lingered about the place where she had lived, as a dried rosebud scents the drawer where it has withered and perished. This lovely Alice had met with some great and mysterious calamity, and had grown thin and white, and gradually faded out of the world. But, even now, she was supposed to haunt the House of the Seven Gables, and, a great many times, — especially when one of the Pyncheons was to die, — she had been heard playing sadly and beautifully on the harpsichord. One of these tunes, just as it had sounded from her spiritual touch, had been written down by an amateur of music; it was so exquisitely mournful that nobody, to this day, could bear to hear it played, unless when a great sorrow had made them know the still profounder sweetness of it.

“Was it the same harpsichord that you showed me?” inquired Phoebe.

“The very same,” said Hepzibah. “It was Alice Pyncheon’s harpsichord. When I was learning music, my father would never let me open it. So, as I could only play on my teacher’s instrument, I have forgotten all my music, long ago.”

Leaving these antique themes, the old lady began to talk about the daguerreotypist, whom, as he seemed to be a well-meaning and orderly young man, and in narrow circumstances, she had permitted to take up his residence in one of the seven gables. But, on seeing more of Mr. Holgrave, she hardly knew what to make of him. He had the strangest companions imaginable: men with long beards, and dressed in linen blouses, and other such newfangled and ill-fitting



garments; reformers, temperance lecturers, and all manner of cross-looking philanthropists; community-men and come-outers, as Hepzibah believed, who acknowledged no law, and ate no solid food, but lived on the scent of other people's cookery, and turned up their noses at the fare. As for the daguerreotypist, she had read a paragraph in a penny paper, the other day, accusing him of making a speech full of wild and disorganizing matter, at a meeting of his banditti-like associates. For her own part, she had reason to believe that he practised animal magnetism, and, if such things were in fashion now-a-days, should be apt to suspect him of study the Black Art, up there in his lonesome chamber.

"But, dear cousin," said Phoebe, "if the young man is so dangerous, why do you let him stay? If he does nothing worse, he may set the house on fire!"

"Why, sometimes," answered Hepzibah, "I have seriously made it a question, whether I ought not to send him away. But, with all his oddities, he is a quiet kind of a person, and has such a way of taking hold of one's mind, that, without exactly liking him (for I don't know enough of the young man), I should be sorry to lose sight of him entirely. A woman clings to slight acquaintances when she lives so much alone as I do."

"But if Mr. Holgrave is a lawless person!" remonstrated Phoebe, a part of whose essence it was to keep within the limits of law.

"Oh!" said Hepzibah, carelessly, — for, formal as she was, still, in her life's experience, she had gnashed her teeth against human law, — "I suppose he has a law of his own!"

