

The *House* &
— of —
Seven Gables
by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Chapter 20: The Flower of Eden

PHOEBE, coming so suddenly from the sunny daylight, was altogether bedimmed in such density of shadow as lurked in most of the passages of the old house. She was not at first aware by whom she had been admitted. Before her eyes had adapted themselves to the obscurity, a hand grasped her own, with a firm but gentle and warm pressure, thus imparting a welcome which caused her heart to leap and thrill with an indefinable shiver of enjoyment. She felt herself drawn along, not towards the parlor, but into a large and unoccupied apartment, which had formerly been the grand reception-room of the seven gables. The sunshine came freely into all the uncurtained windows of this room, and fell upon the dusty floor; so that Phoebe now clearly saw — what, indeed, had been no secret, after the encounter of a warm hand with hers — that it was not Hepzibah nor Clifford, but Holgrave, to whom she owed her reception. The subtle, intuitive communication, or, rather, the vague and formless impression of something to be told, had made her yield unresistingly to his impulse. Without taking away her hand, she looked eagerly in his face, not quick to forebode evil, but unavoidably conscious that the state of the family had changed since her departure, and therefore anxious for an explanation.

The artist looked paler than ordinary; there was a thoughtful and severe contraction of his forehead, tracing a deep vertical line between the eyebrows. His smile, however, was full of genuine warmth, and had in it a joy, by far the most vivid expression that Phoebe had ever witnessed, shining out of the New England reserve with which Holgrave habitually masked whatever lay near his heart. It was the look wherewith a man, brooding alone over some fearful object, in a dreary forest or illimitable desert, would recognize the familiar aspect of his dearest friend, bringing up all the peaceful ideas that belong to home, and the gentle current of every-day affairs. And yet, as he felt the necessity of responding to her look of inquiry, the smile disappeared.

“I ought not to rejoice that you have come, Phoebe,” said he. “We meet at a strange moment!”

“What has happened?” she exclaimed. “Why is the house so deserted? Where are Hepzibah and Clifford?”



“Gone! I cannot imagine where they are!” answered Holgrave. “We are alone in the house!”

“Hepzibah and Clifford gone?” cried Phoebe. “It is not possible! And why have you brought me into this room, instead of the parlor? Ah, something terrible has happened! I must run and see!”

“No, no, Phoebe!” said Holgrave, holding her back. “It is as I have told you. They are gone, and I know not whither. A terrible event has, indeed, happened, but not to them, nor, as I undoubtingly believe, through any agency of theirs. If I read your character rightly, Phoebe,” he continued, fixing his eyes on hers, with stern anxiety, intermixed with tenderness, “gentle as you are, and seeming to have your sphere among common things, you yet possess remarkable strength. You have wonderful poise, and a faculty which, when tested, will prove itself capable of dealing with matters that fall far out of the ordinary rule.”

“Oh, no, I am very weak!” replied Phoebe, trembling. “But tell me what has happened!”

“You are strong!” persisted Holgrave. “You must be both strong and wise; for I am all astray, and need your counsel. It may be you can suggest the one right thing to do!”

“Tell me! — tell me!” said Phoebe, all in a tremble. “It oppresses, — it terrifies me, — this mystery! Anything else I can bear!”

The artist hesitated. Notwithstanding what he had just said, and most sincerely, in regard to the self-balancing power with which Phoebe impressed him, it still seemed almost wicked to bring the awful secret of yesterday to her knowledge. It was like dragging a hideous shape of death into the cleanly and cheerful space before a household fire, where it would present all the uglier aspect, amid the decorousness of everything about it. Yet it could not be concealed from her; she must needs know it.

“Phoebe,” said he, “do you remember this?”

He put into her hand a daguerreotype; the same that he had shown her at their first interview, in the garden, and which so strikingly brought out the hard and relentless traits of the original.

“What has this to do with Hepzibah and Clifford?” asked Phoebe, with impatient surprise that Holgrave should so trifle with her, at such a moment. “It is Judge Pyncheon! You have shown it to me before!”

“But here is the same face taken within this half hour,” said the artist, presenting her with another miniature. “I had just finished it, when I heard you at the door.”

“This is death!” shuddered Phoebe, turning very pale. “Judge Pyncheon dead!”

“Such as there represented,” said Holgrave, “he sits in the next room. The judge is dead, and Clifford and Hepzibah have vanished! I know no more. All beyond is conjecture. On



returning to my solitary chamber, last evening, I noticed no light, either in the parlor, or Hepzibah's room, or Clifford's; no stir nor footstep about the house. This morning there was the same death-like quiet. From my window, I overheard the testimony of a neighbor that your relatives were seen leaving the house, in the midst of yesterday's storm. A rumor reached me, too, of Judge Pyncheon being missed. A feeling which I cannot describe — an indefinite sense of some catastrophe, or consummation — impelled me to make my way into this part of the house, where I discovered what you see. As a point of evidence that may be useful to Clifford, and also as a memorial valuable to myself, — for, Phoebe, there are hereditary reasons that connect me strangely with that man's fate, — I used the means at my disposal to preserve this pictorial record of Judge Pyncheon's death.”

Even in her agitation, Phoebe could not help remarking the calmness of Holgrave's demeanor. He appeared, it is true, to feel the whole awfulness of the judge's death, yet had received the fact into his mind without any mixture of surprise, but as an event pre-ordained, happening inevitably, and so fitting itself into past occurrences that it could almost have been prophesied.

“Why have you not thrown open the doors, and called in witnesses?” inquired she, with a painful shudder. “It is terrible to be here alone!”

“But Clifford!” suggested the artist. “Clifford and Hepzibah! We must consider what is best to be done in their behalf. It is a wretched fatality, that they should have disappeared! Their flight will throw the worst coloring over this event of which it is susceptible. Yet how easy is the explanation, to those who know them! Bewildered and terror-stricken by the similarity of this death to a former one, which was attended with such disastrous consequences to Clifford, they have had no idea but of removing themselves from the scene. How miserably unfortunate! Had Hepzibah but shrieked aloud, — had Clifford flung wide the door, and proclaimed Judge Pyncheon's death, — it would have been, however awful in itself, an event fruitful of good consequences to them. As I view it, it would have gone far towards obliterating the black stain on Clifford's character.”

“And how,” asked Phoebe, “could any good come from what is so very dreadful?”

“Because,” said the artist, “if the matter can be fairly considered, and candidly interpreted, it must be evident that Judge Pyncheon could not have come unfairly to his end. This mode of death has been an idiosyncrasy with his family, for generations past, not often occurring, indeed, but, when it does occur, usually attacking individuals about the judge's time of life, and generally in the tension of some mental crisis, or, perhaps, in an access of wrath. Old Maule's prophecy was probably founded on a knowledge of this physical predisposition in the Pyncheon



race. Now, there is a minute and almost exact similarity in the appearances connected with the death that occurred yesterday and those recorded of the death of Clifford's uncle, thirty years ago. It is true, there was a certain arrangement of circumstances, unnecessary to be recounted, which made it possible, — nay, as men look at these things, probable, or even certain, — that old Jaffrey Pyncheon came to a violent death, and by Clifford's hands."

"Whence came those circumstances?" exclaimed Phoebe; "he being innocent, as we know him to be!"

"They were arranged," said Holgrave, — "at least, such has long been my conviction, — they were arranged after the uncle's death and before it was made public, by the man who sits in yonder parlor. His own death, so like that former one, yet attended with none of those suspicious circumstances, seems the stroke of God upon him, at once a punishment for his wickedness, and making plain the innocence of Clifford. But this flight, — it distorts everything! He may be in concealment, near at hand. Could we but bring him back before the discovery of the judge's death, the evil might be rectified."

"We must not hide this thing a moment longer!" said Phoebe. "It is dreadful to keep it so closely in our hearts. Clifford is innocent. God will make it manifest! Let us throw open the doors, and call all the neighborhood to see the truth!"

"You are right, Phoebe," rejoined Holgrave. "Doubtless you are right."

Yet the artist did not feel the horror, which was proper to Phoebe's sweet and order-loving character, at thus finding herself at issue with society, and brought in contact with an event that transcended ordinary rules. Neither was he in haste, like her, to betake himself, within the precincts of common life. On the contrary, he gathered a wild enjoyment, — as it were, a flower of strange beauty, growing in a desolate spot, and blossoming in the wind, — such a flower of momentary happiness he gathered from his present position. It separated Phoebe and himself from the world, and bound them to each other, by their exclusive knowledge of Judge Pyncheon's mysterious death, and the counsel which they were forced to hold respecting it. The secret, so long as it should continue such, kept them within the circle of a spell, a solitude in the midst of men, a remoteness as entire as that of an island in mid-ocean; — once divulged, the ocean would flow betwixt them, standing on its widely-sundered shores. Meanwhile, all the circumstances of their situation seemed to draw them together; they were like two children who go hand in hand, pressing closely to one another's side, through a shadow-haunted passage. The image of awful Death, which filled the house, held them united by his stiffened grasp.



These influences hastened the development of emotions that might not otherwise have flowered so soon. Possibly, indeed, it had been Holgrave's purpose to let them die in their undeveloped germs.

"Why do we delay so?" asked Phoebe. "This secret takes away my breath! Let us throw open the doors!"

"In all our lives, there can never come another moment like this!" said Holgrave. "Phoebe, is it all terror? — nothing but terror? Are you conscious of no joy, as I am, that has made this the only point of life worth living for?"

"It seems a sin," replied Phoebe, trembling, "to think of joy at such a time!"

"Could you but know, Phoebe, how it was with me, the hour before you came!" exclaimed the artist. "A dark, cold, miserable hour! The presence of yonder dead man threw a great black shadow over everything; he made the universe, so far as my perception could reach, a scene of guilt, and of retribution more dreadful than the guilt. The sense of it took away my youth. I never hoped to feel young again! The world looked strange, wild, evil, hostile; — my past life, so lonesome and dreary; my future, a shapeless gloom, which I must mould into gloomy shapes! But, Phoebe, you crossed the threshold; and hope, warmth, and joy came in with you! The black moment became at once a blissful one. It must not pass without the spoken word. I love you!"

"How can you love a simple girl like me?" asked Phoebe, compelled by his earnestness to speak. "You have many, many thoughts, with which I should try in vain to sympathize. And I, — I, too, — I have tendencies with which you would sympathize as little. That is less matter. But I have not scope enough to make you happy."

"You are my only possibility of happiness!" answered Holgrave. "I have no faith in it, except as you bestow it on me!"

"And then — I am afraid!" continued Phoebe, shrinking towards Holgrave, even while she told him so frankly the doubts with which he affected her. "You will lead me out of my own quiet path. You will make me strive to follow you, where it is pathless. I cannot do so. It is not my nature. I shall sink down and perish!"

"Ah, Phoebe!" exclaimed Holgrave, with almost a sigh, and a smile that was burthened with thought. "It will be far otherwise than as you forbode. The world owes all its onward impulses to men ill at ease. The happy man inevitably confines himself within ancient limits. I have a presentiment that, hereafter, it will be my lot to set out trees, to make fences, — perhaps, even, in due time, to build a house for another generation, — in a word, to conform myself to laws, and the peaceful practice of society. Your poise will be more powerful than any oscillating tendency of mine."



“I would not have it so!” said Phoebe, earnestly.

“Do you love me?” asked Holgrave. “If we love one another, the moment has room for nothing more. Let us pause upon it, and be satisfied. Do you love me, Phoebe?”

“You look into my heart,” said she, letting her eyes drop. “You know I love you!”

And it was in this hour, so full of doubt and awe, that the one miracle was wrought, without which every human existence is a blank. The bliss, which makes all things true, beautiful, and holy, shone around this youth and maiden. They were conscious of nothing sad nor old. They transfigured the earth, and made it Eden again, and themselves the two first dwellers in it. The dead man, so close beside them, was forgotten. At such a crisis, there is no death; for immortality is revealed anew, and embraces everything in its hallowed atmosphere.

But how soon the heavy earth-dream settled down again!

“Hark!” whispered Phoebe. “Somebody is at the street door!”

“Now let us meet the world!” said Holgrave. “No doubt, the rumor of Judge Pyncheon’s visit to this house, and the flight of Hepzibah and Clifford, is about to lead to the investigation of the premises. We have no way but to meet it. Let us open the door at once.”

But, to their surprise, before they could reach the street door, — even before they quitted the room in which the foregoing interview had passed, — they heard footsteps in the further passage. The door, therefore, which they supposed to be securely locked, — which Holgrave, indeed, had seen to be so, and at which Phoebe had vainly tried to enter, — must have been opened from without. The sound of footsteps was not harsh, bold, decided, and intrusive, as the gait of strangers would naturally be, making authoritative entrance into a dwelling where they knew themselves un, welcome. It was feeble, as of persons either weak or weary; there was the mingled murmur of two voices, familiar to both the listeners.

“Can it be?” whispered Holgrave.

“It is they!” answered Phoebe. “Thank God! — thank God!”

And then, as if in sympathy with Phoebe’s whispered ejaculation, they heard Hepzibah’s voice, more distinctly.

“Thank God, my brother, we are at home!”

“Well! — Yes! — thank God!” responded Clifford. “A dreary home, Hepzibah! But you have done well to bring me hither! Stay! That parlor-door is open. I cannot pass by it! Let me go and rest me in the arbor, where I used, — oh, very long ago, it seems to me, after what has befallen us, — where I used to be so happy with little Phoebe!”

But the house was not altogether so dreary as Clifford imagined it. They had not made many steps, — in truth, they were lingering in the entry, with the listlessness of an accomplished



purpose, uncertain what to do next, — when Phoebe ran to meet them. On beholding her, Hepzibah burst into tears. With all her might, she had staggered onward beneath the burden of grief and responsibility, until now that it was safe to fling it down. Indeed, she had not energy to fling it down, but had ceased to uphold it, and suffered it to press her to the earth. Clifford appeared the stronger of the two.

“It is our own little Phoebe! — Ah! and Holgrave with her,” exclaimed he, with a glance of keen and delicate insight, and a smile, beautiful, kind, but melancholy. “I thought of you both, as we came down the street, and beheld Alice’s Posies in full bloom. And so the flower of Eden has bloomed, likewise, in this, old, darksome house, to-day.”

