

The Ambitious Guest

by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864)

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ONE SEPTEMBER NIGHT a family had gathered round their hearth, and piled it high with the driftwood of mountain streams, the dry cones of the pine, and the splintered ruins of great trees that had come crashing down the cliff. Up the chimney roared the fire, and brightened the room with its broad blaze. The faces of the father and mother had a sober gladness; the children laughed; the eldest daughter was the image of Happiness at seventeen; and the aged grandmother, who sat knitting in the warmest place, was the image of Happiness grown old. They had found the "herb, heart's-ease," in the bleakest spot of all New England. This family was situated in the Notch of the White Hills, where the wind was sharp throughout the year, and pitilessly cold in the winter--giving their cottage all its fresh inclemency before it descended on the valley of the [Saco](#). They dwelt in a cold spot and a dangerous one; for a mountain towered above their heads, so steep, that the stones would often rumble down its sides and startle them at midnight.

The daughter had just uttered some simple joke that filled them all with amusement, when the wind came through the Notch and seemed to pause before their cottage--rattling the door, with a sound of wailing and crying, before it passed into the valley. For a moment it saddened them, though there was nothing unusual in the tones. But the family was glad again when they perceived that the latch was lifted by some traveler, whose footsteps had been unheard amid the dreary blast which announced his approach, and wailed as he was entering, and went moaning away from the door.

Though they dwelt in such solitude, these people held daily discussions with the world. The romantic pass of the Notch is a great artery, through which the life-blood of internal commerce is continually throbbing between [Maine](#), on one side, and the [Green Mountains](#) and the shores of the [St. Lawrence](#), on the other. The stage-coach always drew up before the door of the cottage. The traveler, with no companion but his walking stick, paused here to exchange a word, so that the sense of loneliness might not utterly overcome him and he could pass through the crack of the mountain, or reach the first house in the valley. And here the traveler, on his way to [Portland](#) market, would put up for the night; and, if a bachelor, might sit an hour beyond the usual bedtime, and steal a kiss from the mountain maid at parting. It was one of those primitive taverns where the traveler pays only for food and lodging, but meets with a homely kindness beyond all price. When the footsteps were heard, therefore, between the outer door and the inner one, the whole family rose up, grandmother, children, and all, as if about to welcome someone who belonged to them, and whose fate was linked with theirs.

The door was opened by a young man. His face at first wore the glum expression, almost hopelessness, of one who travels a wild and bleak road, at nightfall and alone, but soon brightened up when he saw the kindly warmth of his reception. He felt his heart spring forward to meet them all, from the old woman, who wiped a chair with her apron, to the little child that held out its arms to him. One glance and smile placed the stranger on a footing of innocent familiarity with the eldest daughter.

"Ah, this fire is the right thing!" cried he; "especially when there is such a pleasant circle round it. I am quite exhausted; for the Notch is just like the pipe of a great pair of bellows; it has blown a terrible blast in my face all the way from the town of Bartlett."

"Then you are going towards [Vermont](#)?" said the master of the house, as he helped to take a light knapsack off the young man's shoulders.

"Yes; to [Burlington](#), and far enough beyond," replied he. "I meant to have been at Ethan Crawford's tonight; but a pedestrian lingers along such a road as this. It is no matter; for, when I saw this good fire, and all your cheerful faces, I felt as if you had kindled it on purpose for me, and were waiting my arrival. So I shall sit down among you, and make myself at home."

The frank-hearted stranger had just drawn his chair to the fire when something like a heavy footstep was heard rushing down the steep side of the mountain. The family held their breath, because they knew the

sound, and their guest held his own breath by instinct.

"The old mountain has thrown a stone at us, for fear we should forget him," said the landlord, recovering himself. "He sometimes nods his head and threatens to come down; but we are old neighbors, and agree together pretty well most of the time. Besides, we have a sure place of refuge if he should be coming in good earnest."

Let us now suppose the stranger to have finished his supper of bear's meat; and, by his natural manner, was well accepted with the whole family, so that they talked as freely together as if he belonged to their mountain family. He was of a proud, yet gentle spirit; confident and reserved among the rich and great; but ever ready to stoop his head to the lowly cottage door, and be like a brother or a son at the poor man's fireside. In the household of the Notch, he found warmth and simplicity of feeling, the intelligence of New England, and poetry of the natives, which they had gathered from the mountain peaks and chasms, and at the very threshold of their romantic and dangerous dwelling. He had travelled far and alone; his whole life, indeed, had been a solitary path; for, with the lofty caution of his nature, he had kept himself apart from those who might otherwise have been his companions. The family, too, though so kind and generous, had that awareness of unity among themselves, and separation from the world at large, which, in every domestic circle, should still keep a holy place where no stranger may intrude. But this evening a visionary sympathy encouraged the refined and educated youth to pour out his heart before the simple mountaineers, and constrained them to answer him with the same free confidence.

The secret of the young man's character was a high and abstracted ambition. He could have been borne to live an undistinguished life, but not to be forgotten in the grave. Yearning desire had been transformed to hope; and hope, long cherished, had become like certainty, that, unclearly as he journeyed now, a glory was to beam on his entire pathway-though not, perhaps, while he was treading it. But when posterity should gaze back into the present, they would trace the brightness of his footsteps, brightening as meaner glories faded, and confess that a gifted one had passed from his cradle to his tomb with none to recognize him.

"As yet," cried the stranger--his cheek glowing and his eye flashing with enthusiasm--"as yet, I have done nothing. Were I to vanish from the earth tomorrow, none would know so much of me as you: that a nameless youth came up at nightfall from the [Saco](#) valley, and opened his heart to you in the evening, and passed through the Notch by sunrise, and was seen no more. Not a soul would ask, 'Who was he? Where did the wanderer go?' But I cannot die till I have achieved my destiny. Then, let Death come! I shall have built my monument!"

There was a continual flow of natural emotion, gushing forth amid his daydream, which enabled the family to understand this young man's feelings, though so foreign from their own. With quick sensibility of the ridiculous, he blushed at the enthusiasm into which he had been betrayed.

"You laugh at me," said he, taking the eldest daughter's hand, and laughing himself. "You think my ambition as ridiculous as if I were to freeze myself to death on the top of Mount Washington, only that people might scrutinize me from around the countryside. And, truly, that mountain would be a noble base for a man's statue!"

"It is better to sit here by this fire," answered the girl, blushing, "and be comfortable and contented, though nobody thinks about us."

"I suppose," said her father, after a fit of thought, "there is something natural in what the young man says; and if my mind had been turned that way, I might have felt just the same. It is strange, wife, how his talk has set my head running on things that are pretty certain never to come to pass."

"Perhaps they may," observed the wife. "Is the man thinking what he will do when he is a widower?"

"No, no!" cried he, repelling the idea with stern kindness. "When I think of your death, Esther, I think of mine, too. But I was wishing we had a good farm in Bartlett, or Bethlehem, or Littleton, or some other township round the [White Mountains](#); but not where they could tumble on our heads. I should want to stand well with my neighbors and be called Squire, and sent to General Court for a term or two; for a plain, honest man may do as much good there as a lawyer. And when I should be grown quite an old man, and

you an old woman, so as not to be long apart, I might die happy enough in my bed, and leave you all crying around me. A slate gravestone would suit me as well as a marble one--with just my name and age, and a verse of a hymn, and something to let people know that I lived an honest man and died a Christian."

"There now!" exclaimed the stranger; "it is our nature to desire a monument, be it slate or marble, or a pillar of granite, or a glorious memory in the universal heart of man."

"We're in a strange way, tonight," said the wife, with tears in her eyes. "They say it's a sign of something, when folks' minds go a-wandering so."

They listened accordingly. The younger children had been put to bed in another room, but with an open door between, so that they could be heard talking busily among themselves. One and all seemed to have caught the infection from the fireside circle, and were discussing with each other the wild wishes, and childish projects, of what they would do when they came to be men and women. At length a little boy, instead of addressing his brothers and sisters, called out to his mother.

"I'll tell you what I wish, mother," cried he. "I want you and father and grandma'm, and all of us, and the stranger too, to start right away, and go and take a drink out of the basin of the waterfall!"

Nobody could help laughing at the child's notion of leaving a warm bed, and dragging them from a cheerful fire, to visit the basin of the waterfall--a brook, which tumbles over the cliff, deep within the Notch. The boy had hardly spoken when a wagon rattled along the road, and stopped a moment before the door. It appeared to contain two or three men, who were cheering their hearts with the rough chorus of a song, which resounded, in broken notes, between the cliffs, while the singers hesitated whether to continue their journey or put up here for the night.

"Father," said the girl, "they are calling you by name."

But the good man doubted whether they had really called him, and was unwilling to show himself as too attentive of gain by inviting people to patronize his house. He therefore did not hurry to the door; and the lash being soon applied, the travelers plunged into the Notch, still singing and laughing, though their music and laughter came back drearily from the heart of the mountain.

"There, mother!" cried the boy, again. "They'd have given us a ride to the waterfall."

Again they laughed at the child's persistent fancy for a night ramble. But it happened that a light cloud passed over the daughter's spirit; she looked gravely into the fire, and drew a breath that was almost a sigh. It forced its way, in spite of a little struggle to repress it. Then starting and blushing, she looked quickly round the circle, as if they had caught a glimpse into her bosom. The stranger asked what she had been thinking of.

"Nothing," answered she, with a downcast smile. "Only I felt lonesome just then."

"Oh, I have always had a gift of feeling what is in other people's hearts," said he, half seriously. "Shall I tell the secrets of yours? For I know what to think when a young girl shivers by a warm hearth, and complains of lonesomeness at her mother's side. Shall I put these feelings into words?"

"They would not be a girl's feelings any longer if they could be put into words," replied the mountain fairy, laughing, but avoiding his eye.

All this was said apart. Perhaps a germ of love was springing in their hearts, so pure that it might blossom in Paradise, since it could not be matured on earth; for women worship such gentle dignity as his; and the proud, thoughtful, yet kindly soul is most often captivated by simplicity like hers. But while they spoke softly, and he was watching the happy sadness, the light flickering from the fire, the shy craving of a maiden's nature, the wind through the Notch took a deeper and drearier sound. It seemed, as the fanciful stranger said, like the singing of the spirits of the blast, who in old Indian times had their dwelling among these mountains, and made their heights and recesses a sacred region.

There was a wail along the road, as if a funeral were passing. To chase away the gloom, the family threw pine branches on their fire, till the dry leaves crackled and the flame arose, discovering once again a scene of peace and humble happiness. The light hovered about them fondly, and caressed them all. There were the little faces of the children, peeping from their bed apart, and here the father's strength, the mother's passive and careful appearance, the high-browed youth, the budding girl, and the good old grandma, still knitting in the warmest place. The aged woman looked up from her task, and, with fingers ever busy, was the next to speak.

"Old folks have their notions," said she, "as well as young ones. You've been wishing and planning; and letting your heads run on one thing and another, till you've set my mind a-wandering too. Now what should an old woman wish for, when she can go but a step or two before she comes to her grave? Children, it will haunt me night and day till I tell you."

"What is it, mother?" cried the husband and wife at once.

Then the old woman, with an air of mystery which drew the circle closer round the fire, informed them that she had provided her grave-clothes some years before--a nice linen shroud, a cap with a cloth ruff, and everything of a finer sort than she had worn since her wedding day. But this evening an old superstition had strangely recurred to her. It used to be said, in her younger days, that if anything were wrong with a corpse, if only the ruff were not smooth, or the cap did not set right, the corpse in the coffin would strive to put up its cold hands and arrange it. The thought made her nervous.

"Don't talk so, grandmother!" said the girl, shuddering.

"Now," continued the old woman, with singular seriousness, yet smiling strangely at her own foolishness, "I want one of you, my children- when your mother is dressed and in the coffin--I want one of you to hold a looking-glass over my face. Who knows but I may take a glimpse at myself, and see whether all's right?"

"Old and young, we dream of graves and monuments," murmured the stranger youth. "I wonder how sailors feel when the ship is sinking, and they, unknown and commonplace, are to be buried together in the ocean--that wide and nameless?"

For a moment, the old woman's ghastly conception so engrossed the minds of her family that a sound out in the night, rising like the roar of a blast, had grown broad, deep, and terrible, before the fated group were conscious of it. The house and all within it trembled; the foundations of the earth seemed to be shaken, as if this awful sound was the end of the world. Young and old exchanged one wild glance, and remained an instant, pale, fright, without words, or power to move. Then the same shriek burst at the same time from all their lips.

"The Slide! The Slide!"

The simplest words mark the horror of the catastrophe. The victims rushed from their cottage, and sought refuge in what they deemed a safer spot--where, in contemplation of such an emergency, a sort of barrier had been built. Regrettably! They had vacated their security, and fled right into the pathway of destruction. Down came the whole side of the mountain, in a cascade of ruin. Just before it reached the house, the stream broke into two branches--shook not a window there, but overwhelmed the whole vicinity, blocked up the road, and destroyed everything in its dreadful course. Long did the thunder of the great Slide ceased to roar among the mountains, the mortal agony had been endured, and the victims were at peace. Their bodies were never found.

The next morning, the light smoke was seen stealing from the cottage chimney up the mountain side. Within, the fire was yet smoldering on the hearth, and the chairs in a circle round it, as if the inhabitants had but gone forth to view the devastation of the Slide, and would shortly return, to thank Heaven for their miraculous escape. All had left separate tokens, by which those who had known the family, shed a tear for each.