

Fire Worship (From "Mosses From An Old Manse")

Nathaniel Hawthorne

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MOSSES FROM AN OLD MANSE

By Nathaniel Hawthorne

FIRE WORSHIP

It is a great revolution in social and domestic life, and no less so in the life of a secluded student, this almost universal exchange of the open fireplace for the cheerless and ungenial stove. On such a morning as now lowers around our old gray parsonage, I miss the bright face of my ancient friend, who was wont to dance upon the hearth and play the part of more familiar sunshine. It is sad to turn from the cloudy sky and sombre landscape; from yonder hill, with its crown of rusty, black pines, the foliage of which is so dismal in the absence of the sun; that bleak pasture-land, and the broken surface of the potato-field, with the brown clods partly concealed by the snowfall of last night; the swollen and sluggish river, with ice-incrusted borders, dragging its bluish-gray stream along the verge of our orchard like a snake half torpid with the cold,—it is sad to turn from an outward scene of so little comfort and find the same sullen influences brooding within the precincts of my study. Where is that brilliant guest, that quick and subtle spirit, whom Prometheus lured from heaven to civilize mankind and cheer them in their wintry desolation; that comfortable inmate, whose smile, during eight months of the year, was our sufficient consolation for summer's lingering advance and early flight? Alas! blindly inhospitable, grudging the food that kept him cheery and mercurial, we have thrust him into an iron prison, and compel him to smoulder away his life on a daily pittance which once would have been too scanty for his breakfast. Without a metaphor, we now make our fire in an air-tight stove, and supply it with some half a dozen sticks of wood between dawn and nightfall.

I never shall be reconciled to this enormity. Truly may it be said that the world looks darker for it. In one way or another, here and there and all around us, the inventions of mankind are fast blotting the picturesque, the poetic, and the beautiful out of human life. The domestic fire was a type of all these attributes, and seemed to bring might and majesty, and wild nature and a spiritual essence, into our in most home, and yet to dwell with us in such friendliness that its mysteries and marvels excited no dismay. The same mild companion that smiled so placidly in our faces was he that comes roaring out of AEtna and rushes madly up the sky like a fiend breaking loose from torment and fighting for a place among the upper angels. He it is, too, that leaps from cloud to cloud amid the crashing thunder-storm. It was he whom the Gheber worshipped with no unnatural idolatry; and it was he who devoured London and Moscow and many another famous city, and who loves to riot through our own dark forests and sweep across our prairies, and to whose ravenous maw, it is said, the universe shall one day be given as a final feast. Meanwhile he is the great artisan and laborer by whose aid men are enabled to build a world within a world, or, at least, to smooth

down the rough creation which Nature flung to its. He forges the mighty anchor and every lesser instrument; he drives the steamboat and drags the rail-car; and it was he--this creature of terrible might, and so many-sided utility and all-comprehensive destructiveness--that used to be the cheerful, homely friend of our wintry days, and whom we have made the prisoner of this iron cage.

How kindly he was! and, though the tremendous agent of change, yet bearing himself with such gentleness, so rendering himself a part of all life-long and age-coeval associations, that it seemed as if he were the great conservative of nature. While a man was true to the fireside, so long would he be true to country and law, to the God whom his fathers worshipped, to the wife of his youth, and to all things else which instinct or religion has taught us to consider sacred. With how sweet humility did this elemental spirit perform all needful offices for the household in which he was domesticated! He was equal to the concoction of a grand dinner, yet scorned not to roast a potato or toast a bit of cheese. How humanely did he cherish the school-boy's icy fingers, and thaw the old man's joints with a genial warmth which almost equalled the glow of youth! And how carefully did he dry the cowhide boots that had trudged through mud and snow, and the shaggy outside garment stiff with frozen sleet! taking heed, likewise, to the comfort of the faithful dog who had followed his master through the storm. When did he refuse a coal to light a pipe, or even a part of his own substance to kindle a neighbor's fire? And then, at twilight, when laborer, or scholar, or mortal of whatever age, sex, or degree, drew a chair beside him and looked into his glowing face, how acute, how profound, how comprehensive was his sympathy with the mood of each and all! He pictured forth their very thoughts. To the youthful he showed the scenes of the adventurous life before them; to the aged the shadows of departed love and hope; and, if all earthly things had grown distasteful, he could gladden the fireside muser with golden glimpses of a better world. And, amid this varied communion with the human soul, how busily would the sympathizer, the deep moralist, the painter of magic pictures, be causing the teakettle to boil!

Nor did it lessen the charm of his soft, familiar courtesy and helpfulness that the mighty spirit, were opportunity offered him, would run riot through the peaceful house, wrap its inmates in his terrible embrace, and leave nothing of them save their whitened bones. This possibility of mad destruction only made his domestic kindness the more beautiful and touching. It was so sweet of him, being endowed with such power, to dwell day after day, and one long lonesome night after another, on the dusky hearth, only now and then betraying his wild nature by thrusting his red tongue out of the chimney-top! True, he had done much mischief in the world, and was pretty certain to do more; but his warm heart atoned for all. He was kindly to the race of man; and they pardoned his characteristic imperfections.

The good old clergyman, my predecessor in this mansion, was well acquainted with the comforts of the fireside. His yearly allowance of wood, according to the terms of his settlement, was no less than sixty cords. Almost an annual forest was converted from sound oaklogs into ashes, in the kitchen, the parlor, and this little study, where now an unworthy successor, not in the pastoral office, but merely in his earthly abode, sits scribbling beside an air-tight stove. I love to fancy one of those fireside days while the good

man, a contemporary of the Revolution, was in his early prime, some five-and-sixty years ago. Before sunrise, doubtless, the blaze hovered upon the gray skirts of night and dissolved the frostwork that had gathered like a curtain over the small window-panes. There is something peculiar in the aspect of the morning fireside; a fresher, brisker glare; the absence of that mellowness which can be produced only by half-consumed logs, and shapeless brands with the white ashes on them, and mighty coals, the remnant of tree-trunks that the hungry, elements have gnawed for hours. The morning hearth, too, is newly swept, and the brazen andirons well brightened, so that the cheerful fire may see its face in them. Surely it was happiness, when the pastor, fortified with a substantial breakfast, sat down in his arm-chair and slippers and opened the Whole Body of Divinity, or the Commentary on Job, or whichever of his old folios or quartos might fall within the range of his weekly sermons. It must have been his own fault if the warmth and glow of this abundant hearth did not permeate the discourse and keep his audience comfortable in spite of the bitterest northern blast that ever wrestled with the church-steeple. He reads while the heat warps the stiff covers of the volume; he writes without numbness either in his heart or fingers; and, with unstinted hand, he throws fresh sticks of wood upon the fire.

A parishioner comes in. With what warmth of benevolence--how should he be otherwise than warm in any of his attributes?--does the minister bid him welcome, and set a chair for him in so close proximity to the hearth, that soon the guest finds it needful to rub his scorched shins with his great red hands! The melted snow drips from his steaming boots and bubbles upon the hearth. His puckered forehead unravels its entanglement of crisscross wrinkles. We lose much of the enjoyment of fireside heat without such an opportunity of marking its genial effect upon those who have been looking the inclement weather in the face. In the course of the day our clergyman himself strides forth, perchance to pay a round of pastoral visits; or, it may be, to visit his mountain of a wood-pile and cleave the monstrous logs into billets suitable for the fire. He returns with fresher life to his beloved hearth. During the short afternoon the western sunshine comes into the study and strives to stare the ruddy blaze out of countenance but with only a brief triumph, soon to be succeeded by brighter glories of its rival. Beautiful it is to see the strengthening gleam, the deepening light that gradually casts distinct shadows of the human figure, the table, and the high-backed chairs upon the opposite wall, and at length, as twilight comes on, replenishes the room with living radiance and makes life all rose-color. Afar the wayfarer discerns the flickering flame as it dances upon the windows, and hails it as a beacon-light of humanity, reminding him, in his cold and lonely path, that the world is not all snow, and solitude, and desolation. At eventide, probably, the study was peopled with the clergyman's wife and family, and children tumbled themselves upon the hearth-rug, and grave puss sat with her back to the fire, or gazed, with a semblance of human meditation, into its fervid depths. Seasonably the plenteous ashes of the day were raked over the mouldering brands, and from the heap came jets of flame, and an incense of night-long smoke creeping quietly up the chimney.

Heaven forgive the old clergyman! In his later life, when for almost ninety winters he had been gladdened by the firelight,--when it had gleamed upon him from infancy to extreme age, and never

without brightening his spirits as well as his visage, and perhaps keeping him alive so long,--he had the heart to brick up his chimney-place and bid farewell to the face of his old friend forever, why did he not take an eternal leave of the sunshine too? His sixty cords of wood had probably dwindled to a far less ample supply in modern times; and it is certain that the parsonage had grown crazy with time and tempest and pervious to the cold; but still it was one of the saddest tokens of the decline and fall of open fireplaces that, the gray patriarch should have deigned to warm himself at an air-tight stove.

And I, likewise,--who have found a home in this ancient owl's-nest since its former occupant took his heavenward flight,--I, to my shame, have put up stoves in kitchen and parlor and chamber. Wander where you will about the house, not a glimpse of the earth-born, heaven-aspiring fiend of Etna,--him that sports in the thunder-storm, the idol of the Ghebers, the devourer of cities, the forest-rioter and prairie-sweeper, the future destroyer of our earth, the old chimney-corner companion who mingled himself so sociably with household joys and sorrows,--not a glimpse of this mighty and kindly one will greet your eyes. He is now an invisible presence. There is his iron cage. Touch it, and he scorches your fingers. He delights to singe a garment or perpetrate any other little unworthy mischief; for his temper is ruined by the ingratitude of mankind, for whom he cherished such warmth of feeling, and to whom he taught all their arts, even that of making his own prison-house. In his fits of rage he puffs volumes of smoke and noisome gas through the crevices of the door, and shakes the iron walls of his dungeon so as to overthrow the ornamental urn upon its summit. We tremble lest he should break forth amongst us. Much of his time is spent in sighs, burdened with unutterable grief, and long drawn through the funnel. He amuses himself, too, with repeating all the whispers, the moans, and the louder utterances or tempestuous howls of the wind; so that the stove becomes a microcosm of the aerial world. Occasionally there are strange combinations of sounds,--voices talking almost articulately within the hollow chest of iron,--insomuch that fancy beguiles me with the idea that my firewood must have grown in that infernal forest of lamentable trees which breathed their complaints to Dante. When the listener is half asleep he may readily take these voices for the conversation of spirits and assign them an intelligible meaning. Anon there is a pattering noise,--drip, drip, drip,--as if a summer shower were falling within the narrow circumference of the stove.

These barren and tedious eccentricities are all that the air-tight stove can bestow in exchange for the invaluable moral influences which we have lost by our desertion of the open fireplace. Alas! is this world so very bright that we can afford to choke up such a domestic fountain of gladness, and sit down by its darkened source without being conscious of a gloom?

It is my belief that social intercourse cannot long continue what it has been, now that we have subtracted from it so important and vivifying an element as firelight. The effects will be more perceptible on our children and the generations that shall succeed them than on ourselves, the mechanism of whose life may remain unchanged, though its spirit be far other than it was. The sacred trust of the household fire has been transmitted in unbroken succession from the earliest ages, and faithfully cherished in spite

of every discouragement such as the curfew law of the Norman conquerors, until in these evil days physical science has nearly succeeded in extinguishing it. But we at least have our youthful recollections tinged with the glow of the hearth, and our life-long habits and associations arranged on the principle of a mutual bond in the domestic fire. Therefore, though the sociable friend be forever departed, yet in a degree he will be spiritually present with us; and still more will the empty forms which were once full of his rejoicing presence continue to rule our manners. We shall draw our chairs together as we and our forefathers have been wont for thousands of years back, and sit around some blank and empty corner of the room, babbling with unreal cheerfulness of topics suitable to the homely fireside. A warmth from the past--from the ashes of bygone years and the raked-up embers of long ago--will sometimes thaw the ice about our hearts; but it must be otherwise with our successors. On the most favorable supposition, they will be acquainted with the fireside in no better shape than that of the sullen stove; and more probably they will have grown up amid furnace heat in houses which might be fancied to have their foundation over the infernal pit, whence sulphurous steams and unbreathable exhalations ascend through the apertures of the floor. There will be nothing to attract these poor children to one centre. They will never behold one another through that peculiar medium of vision the ruddy gleam of blazing wood or bituminous coal---which gives the human spirit so deep an insight into its fellows and melts all humanity into one cordial heart of hearts. Domestic life, if it may still be termed domestic, will seek its separate corners, and never gather itself into groups. The easy gossip; the merry yet unambitious Jest; the life-like, practical discussion of real matters in a casual way; the soul of truth which is so often incarnated in a simple fireside word,--will disappear from earth. Conversation will contract the air of debate, and all mortal intercourse be chilled with a fatal frost.

In classic times, the exhortation to fight "pro axis et focus," for the altars and the hearths, was considered the strongest appeal that could be made to patriotism. And it seemed an immortal utterance; for all subsequent ages and people have acknowledged its force and responded to it with the full portion of manhood that nature had assigned to each. Wisely were the altar and the hearth conjoined in one mighty sentence; for the hearth, too, had its kindred sanctity. Religion sat down beside it, not in the priestly robes which decorated and perhaps disguised her at the altar, but arrayed in a simple matron's garb, and uttering her lessons with the tenderness of a mother's voice and heart. The holy hearth! If any earthly and material thing, or rather a divine idea embodied in brick and mortar, might be supposed to possess the permanence of moral truth, it was this. All revered it. The man who did not put off his shoes upon this holy ground would have deemed it pastime to trample upon the altar. It has been our task to uproot the hearth. What further reform is left for our children to achieve, unless they overthrow the altar too? And by what appeal hereafter, when the breath of hostile armies may mingle with the pure, cold breezes of our country, shall we attempt to rouse up native valor? Fight for your hearths? There will be none throughout the land.

FIGHT FOR YOUR STOVES! Not I, in faith. If in such a cause I strike a blow, it shall be on the invader's part; and Heaven grant that it may shatter the abomination all to pieces!

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By Nathaniel Hawthorne

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