

# HAWTHORNE NATHANIEL

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"TWICE TOLD TALES")

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### **(From «Twice Told Tales»)**

## **EDWARD FANE'S ROSEBUD**

There is hardly a more difficult exercise of fancy, than, while gazing at a figure of melancholy age, to re-create its youth, and, without entirely obliterating the identity of form and features, to restore those graces which time has snatched away. Some old people, especially women, so age-worn and woeful are they, seem never to have been young and gay. It is easier to conceive that such gloomy phantoms were sent into the world as withered and decrepit as we behold them now, with sympathies only for pain and grief, to watch at death-beds, and weep at funerals. Even the sable garments of their widowhood appear essential to their existence; all their attributes combine to render them darksome shadows, creeping strangely amid the sunshine of human life. Yet it is no unprofitable task, to take one of these doleful creatures, and set fancy resolutely at work to brighten the dim eye, and darken the silvery locks, and paint the ashen cheek with rose-color, and repair the shrunken and crazy form, till a dewy maiden shall be seen in the old matron's elbow-chair. The miracle being

wrought, then let the years roll back again, each sadder than the last, and the whole weight of age and sorrow settle down upon the youthful figure.

Wrinkles and furrows, the handwriting of Time, may thus be deciphered, and found to contain deep lessons of thought and feeling. Such profit might be derived, by a skilful observer, from my much-respected friend, the Widow Toothaker, a nurse of great repute, who has breathed the atmosphere of sick-chambers and dying breaths these forty years.

See! she sits cowering over her lonesome hearth, with her gown and upper petticoat drawn upward, gathering thriftily into her person the whole warmth of the fire, which, now at nightfall, begins to dissipate the autumnal chill of her chamber. The blaze quivers capriciously in front, alternately glimmering into the deepest chasms of her wrinkled visage, and then permitting a ghostly dimness to mar the outlines of her venerable figure. And Nurse Toothaker holds a teaspoon in her right hand, with which to stir up the contents of a tumbler in her left, whence steams a vapory fragrance, abhorred of temperance societies. Now she sips, – now stirs, – now sips again. Her sad old heart has need to be revived by the rich infusion of Geneva, which is mixed half and half with hot water, in the tumbler. All day long she has been sitting by a death-pillow, and quitted it for her home, only when the spirit of her patient left the clay and went homeward too. But now are her melancholy meditations cheered, and her torpid blood warmed, and her shoulders lightened of at least

twenty ponderous years, by a draught from the true Fountain of Youth, in a case-bottle. It is strange that men should deem that fount a fable when its liquor fills more bottles than the Congress-water! Sip it again, good nurse, and see whether a second draught will not take off another score of years, and perhaps ten more, and show us, in your high-backed chair, the blooming damsel who plighted troths with Edward Fane. Get you gone, Age and Widowhood! Come back, unwedded Youth! But, alas! the charm will not work. In spite of fancy's most potent spell, I can see only an old dame cowering over the fire, a picture of decay and desolation, while the November blast roars at her in the chimney, and fitful showers rush suddenly against the window.

Yet there was a time when Rose Grafton – such was the pretty maiden name of Nurse Toothaker – possessed beauty that would have gladdened this dim and dismal chamber as with sunshine. It won for her the heart of Edward Fane, who has since made so great a figure in the world, and is now a grand old gentleman, with powdered hair, and as gouty as a lord. These early lovers thought to have walked hand in hand through life. They had wept together for Edward's little sister Mary, whom Rose tended in her sickness, partly because she was the sweetest child that ever lived or died, but more for love of him. She was but three years old. Being such an infant, Death could not embody his terrors in her little corpse; nor did Rose fear to touch the dead child's brow, though chill, as she curled the silken hair around it, nor to take her tiny hand, and clasp a flower within its fingers. Afterward,

when she looked through the pane of glass in the coffin-lid, and beheld Mary's face, it seemed not so much like death, or life, as like a waxwork, wrought into the perfect image of a child asleep, and dreaming of its mother's smile. Rose thought her too fair a thing to be hidden in the grave, and wondered that an angel did not snatch up little Mary's coffin, and bear the slumbering babe to heaven, and bid her wake immortal. But when the sods were laid on little Mary, the heart of Rose was troubled. She shuddered at the fantasy, that, in grasping the child's cold fingers, her virgin hand had exchanged a first greeting with mortality, and could never lose the earthly taint. How many a greeting since! But as yet, she was a fair young girl, with the dewdrops of fresh feeling in her bosom; and instead of Rose, which seemed too mature a name for her half-opened beauty, her lover called her Rosebud.

The rosebud was destined never to bloom for Edward Fane. His mother was a rich and haughty dame, with all the aristocratic prejudices of colonial times. She scorned Rose Grafton's humble parentage, and caused her son to break his faith, though, had she let him choose, he would have prized his Rosebud above the richest diamond. The lovers parted, and have seldom met again. Both may have visited the same mansions, but not at the same time; for one was bidden to the festal hall, and the other to the sick-chamber; he was the guest of Pleasure and Prosperity, and she of Anguish. Rose, after their separation, was long secluded within the dwelling of Mr. Toothaker, whom she married with the revengeful hope of breaking her false lover's heart. She went

to her bridegroom's arms with bitterer tears, they say, than young girls ought to shed at the threshold of the bridal chamber. Yet, though her husband's head was getting gray, and his heart had been chilled with an autumnal frost, Rose soon began to love him, and wondered at her own conjugal affection. He was all she had to love; there were no children.

In a year or two, poor Mr. Toothaker was visited with a wearisome infirmity which settled in his joints, and made him weaker than a child. He crept forth about his business, and came home at dinner-time and eventide, not with the manly tread that gladdens a wife's heart, but slowly, feebly, jotting down each dull footstep with a melancholy dub of his staff. We must pardon his pretty wife, if she sometimes blushed to own him. Her visitors, when they heard him coming, looked for the appearance of some old, old man; but he dragged his nerveless limbs into the parlor, – and there was Mr. Toothaker! The disease increasing, he never went into the sunshine, save with a staff in his right hand and his left on his wife's shoulder, bearing heavily downward, like a dead man's hand. Thus, a slender woman, still looking maiden-like, she supported his tall, broad-chested frame along the pathway of their little garden, and plucked the roses for her gray-haired husband, and spoke soothingly, as to an infant. His mind was palsied with his body; its utmost energy was peevishness. In a few months more, she helped him up the staircase, with a pause at every step, and a longer one upon the landingplace, and a heavy glance behind, as he crossed the threshold of his chamber. He

knew, poor man, that the precincts of those four walls would thenceforth be his world, – his world, his home, his tomb, – at once a dwelling and a burial-place, till he were borne to a darker and a narrower one. But Rose was with him in the tomb. He leaned upon her, in his daily passage from the bed to the chair by the fireside, and back again from the weary chair to the joyless bed, – his bed and hers, – their marriage-bed; till even this short journey ceased, and his head lay all day upon the pillow, and hers all night beside it. How long poor Mr. Toothaker was kept in misery! Death seemed to draw near the door, and often to lift the latch, and sometimes to thrust his ugly skull into the chamber, nodding to Rose, and pointing at her husband, but still delayed to enter. "This bedridden wretch cannot escape me!" quoth Death. "I will go forth, and run a race with the swift, and fight a battle with the strong, and come back for Toothaker at my leisure!" O, when the deliverer came so near in the dull anguish of her worn-out sympathies, did she never long to cry, "Death, come in!"

But, no! We have no right to ascribe such a wish to our friend Rose. She never failed in a wife's duty to her poor sick husband. She murmured not, though a glimpse of the sunny sky was as strange to her as him, nor answered peevishly, though his complaining accents roused her from her sweetest dream, only to share his wretchedness. He knew her faith, yet nourished a cankered jealousy; and when the slow disease had chilled all his heart, save one lukewarm spot, which Death's frozen fingers were searching for, his last words were, "What would my Rose



have done for her first love, if she has been so true and kind to a sick old man like me!" And then his poor soul crept away, and left the body lifeless, though hardly more so than for years before, and Rose a widow, though in truth it was the wedding-night that widowed her. She felt glad, it must be owned, when Mr. Toothaker was buried, because his corpse had retained such a likeness to the man half alive, that she hearkened for the sad murmur of his voice, bidding her shift his pillow. But all through the next winter, though the grave had held him many a month, she fancied him calling from that cold bed, "Rose! Rose! come put a blanket on my feet."

So now the Rosebud was the Widow Toothaker. Her troubles had come early, and, tedious as they seemed, had passed before all her bloom was fled. She was still fair enough to captivate a bachelor, or, with a widow's cheerful gravity, she might have won a widower, stealing into his heart in the very guise of his dead wife. But the Widow Toothaker had no such projects. By her watchings and continual cares, her heart had become knit to her first husband with a constancy which changed its very nature, and made her love him for his infirmities, and infirmity for his sake. When the palsied old man was gone, even her early lover could not have supplied his place. She had dwelt in a sick-chamber, and been the companion of a half-dead wretch, till she could scarcely breathe in a free air, and felt ill at ease with the healthy and the happy. She missed the fragrance of the doctor's stuff. She walked the chamber with a noiseless footfall. If visitors came

in, she spoke in soft and soothing accents, and was startled and shocked by their loud voices. Often in the lonesome evening, she looked timorously from the fireside to the bed, with almost a hope of recognizing a ghastly face upon the pillow. Then went her thoughts sadly to her husband's grave. If one impatient throb had wronged him in his lifetime, – if she had secretly repined, because her buoyant youth was imprisoned with his torpid age, – if ever, while slumbering beside him, a treacherous dream had admitted another into her heart, – yet the sick man had been preparing a revenge, which the dead now claimed. On his painful pillow, he had cast a spell around her; his groans and misery had proved more captivating charms than gayety and youthful grace; in his semblance, Disease itself had won the Rosebud for a bride; nor could his death dissolve the nuptials. By that indissoluble bond she had gained a home in every sick-chamber, and nowhere else; there were her brethren and sisters; thither her husband summoned her, with that voice which had seemed to issue from the grave of Toothaker. At length she recognized her destiny.

We have beheld her as the maid, the wife, the widow; now we see her in a separate and insulated character; she was, in all her attributes, Nurse Toothaker. And Nurse Toothaker alone, with her own shrivelled lips, could make known her experience in that capacity. What a history might she record of the great sicknesses, in which she has gone hand in hand with the exterminating angel! She remembers when the small-pox hoisted a red banner on almost every house along the street. She has witnessed when

the typhus fever swept off a whole household, young and old, all but a lonely mother, who vainly shrieked to follow her last loved one. Where would be Death's triumph, if none lived to weep? She can speak of strange maladies that have broken out, as if spontaneously, but were found to have been imported from foreign lands, with rich silks and other merchandise, the costliest portion of the cargo. And once, she recollects, the people died of what was considered a new pestilence, till the doctors traced it to the ancient grave of a young girl, who thus caused many deaths a hundred years after her own burial. Strange that such black mischief should lurk in a maiden's grave! She loves to tell how strong men fight with fiery fevers, utterly refusing to give up their breath; and how consumptive virgins fade out of the world, scarcely reluctant, as if their lovers were wooing them to a far country. Tell us, thou fearful woman! tell us the death-secrets! Fain would I search out the meaning of words, faintly gasped with intermingled sobs, and broken sentences, half audibly spoken between earth and the judgment-seat!

An awful woman! She is the patron saint of young physicians, and the bosom friend of old ones. In the mansions where she enters, the inmates provide themselves black garments; the coffin-maker follows her; and the bell tolls as she comes away from the threshold. Death himself has met her at so many a bedside, that he puts forth his bony hand to greet Nurse Toothaker.

She is an awful woman! And, O, is it conceivable, that this

handmaid of human infirmity and affliction – so darkly stained, so thoroughly imbued with all that is saddest in the doom of mortals – can ever again be bright and gladsome, even though bathed in the sunshine of eternity? By her long communion with woe, has she not forfeited her inheritance of immortal joy? Does any germ of bliss survive within her?

Hark! an eager knocking at Nurse Toothaker's door. She starts from her drowsy reverie, sets aside the empty tumbler and teaspoon, and lights a lamp at the dim embers of the fire. Rap, rap, rap! again; and she hurries a-down the staircase, wondering which of her friends can be at death's door now, since there is such an earnest messenger at Nurse Toothaker's. Again the peal resounds, just as her hand is on the lock. "Be quick, Nurse Toothaker!" cries a man on the doorstep; "old General Fane is taken with the gout in his stomach, and has sent for you to watch by his death-bed. Make haste, for there is no time to lose!"

"Fane! Edward Fane! And has he sent for me at last? I am ready! I will get on my cloak and begone. So," adds the sable-gowned, ashen-visaged, funereal old figure, "Edward Fane remembers his Rosebud!"

Our question is answered. There is a germ of bliss within her. Her long-hoarded constancy – her memory of the bliss that was – remaining amid the gloom of her after life, like a sweet-smelling flower in a coffin, is a symbol that all maybe renewed. In some happier clime, the Rosebud may revive again with all the dewdrops in its bosom.