THE SCARLET LETTER by Nathaniel Hawthorne THE CUSTOM-HOUSE INTRODUCTORY TO "THE SCARLET LETTER" It is a little remarkable, that--though disinclined to talk overmuch of myself and my affairs at the fireside, and to my personal friends--an autobiographical impulse should twice in my life ha ve taken possession of me, in addressing the public. The first time was three or four years since, when I favoured the reader--inexcusably, and f or no e arthly r eason that either the indulgent reader or the intrusive author could imagine--with a description of my way of life in the deep quietude of an Old Manse. And now--because, beyond my deserts, I was happy enough to find a listener or two on the former occasion--I again seiz e the pub lic by the b utton, and talk of my three years' experience in a Custom-House. The example of the famous "P. P., Clerk of this Parish," was never mo re faithfully followed. The truth seems to be, however, that when he casts his leaves forth upon the wind, the author addres s es, not th e many who wi ll fling asid e his volume, or never take it up, but the few who will understand him better than most of his schoolmates or lifemates. Som e authors, indeed, do far more than this, and indulge themselves in such confidential depths of revelation as coul d fitt ingly be addr essed only and ex clusive ly t o the one heart and mind of perfect sympathy; as if the printed book, thrown at large on the wide world, were certain t o find out the divided segment of the writer's own nature, and complete his circle of existence by bringing him in to c ommun ion with i t. It i s sca rc ely deco rous, h ow ever, to speak all, even where we speak impersonally. But, as thoughts are frozen and utterance benumbed, unless the speaker stand in some true relation with his audience, it may be pardonable to imagine that a fr iend, a kin d and apprehensive, though not the close st f riend, i s liste ning to our talk; and then, a native reserve being thawed by this genial consciousness, we may prate of the circumstances that lie around us, and even of ourself, but still keep the inmost Me behind its veil. To t his ex tent, a nd w ithin these limits, an author, methinks, may be autobiog ra p hical, w it hout violating either the reader's rights or his own. It will be seen, likewise, that this Custom-Hous e sketch has a certain propriety, of a kind always recognised in literature, as explaining how a lar ge port io n of the following pages came into my possession, and as offering proofs of t he aut henticity of a narrative therein contained. This, in fact--a desire to put myself in my true position a s editor, or very little more, of the most prolix among the tales that make up my volume--this, and no ot her, is my true reason for assuming a personal relation with the public. In accompli shin g the m ain purpose, it has appeared allowable, by a few extra touches, to give a faint representation o f a mode of life not heretofore described, together with some of the characters that move in i t, amo ng whom the author happened to make one. In my native town of Salem, at the head of what, hal f a ce ntury ago, in the days of old King Derby, was a bustling wharf--but which is now burdened wit h decayed wooden warehouses, and exhibits few or no symptoms of commercial life ; excep t, perhaps, a bark or brig, half-way down its melancholy length, discharging hides; or, nearer at hand, a N ova Sc otia schooner, pitching out her cargo of firewood--at the head, I say, of this dilapidated wharf, which the tide often overflows, and along which, at the base and in the rear o f the r o w of buildings, the track of many languid years is seen in a border of unthrifty grass--here, with a view from its front windows adown this not very enlivening prospect, and thence across the harbou r, stands a spacious edifice of brick. From the loftiest point of its roof, during precis ely thr ee and a half hours of each forenoon, floats or droops, in breeze or calm, the banner of the republic; but with the thirte en stri pes turned vertically, instead of horizontally, and thus indicating that a civil, and not a military, post of Uncle Sam's government is here established. Its front is orn amented with a portico of half-a-dozen wooden pillars, supporting a balcony, beneath which a flight of wide granite steps desc ends t owards the street. Over the entrance hovers an enormous specimen of the Ame rican eagle, with outspread wings, a shield before her breast, and, if I recoll ect ari ght, a bunch of intermingled thunderbolts and barbed arrows in each claw. With the customary infirmity of temper that characterizes th is un happy fowl, she appears by the fierceness of her beak and eye, and the general truculency of her attitude, to threaten mischief to the inoffensive co mmuni ty; and especially to warn all citizens careful of their safety against intruding on the premises which she overshadows with her wings. Ne vert heless , vixenly as she looks, many people are seeking at this very moment to shelter themselves under the wing of the federal eagle; imagining, I presume, that her bosom has all the softness and snugness of an eiderdown pillow. But she has no great tenderness even in her best of moods , and, sooner or later--oftener soon than late--is apt to fling off her nestlings with a scratch of her claw, a dab of her beak, or a rankling wound fr om he r barbed arrows. The pavement round about the above-described edifice--which we may as well name at once as the Custom-House of the port--has gr ass e nough growing in its chinks to show that it has not, of late days, been worn by any multitudinous resort of business. In some month s of th e year, however, there often chances a forenoon when affairs move onward with a livelier tread. Such occasions might remind the elderly citizen of that period , befor e the last war with England, when Salem was a port by itself; no t scorned, as she is now, by her own merchants and ship-ow ners, who permit her wharves to crumble t o ru in while their ventures go to swell, needlessly and imperceptibly, the mighty flood of commerce at N ew Yor k or Boston. On some such morning, when three or four vessel s happen to have arrived at once usually from Africa or Sout h Ame rica--or to be on the verge of their departure thit herward, there is a sound of frequent feet passing briskly up and down the granite steps. Here, be fore h is own wife has greeted him, you may greet the sea-flushed shi p-master, just in port, with his vessel's papers under his arm in a t arnished tin box. Here, too, comes his o w ne r, cheerful, sombre, gracious or in the sulks, accordingly as his scheme of the now accomplished voya ge has been realized in merchandise that will readily be t urned to gold, or has buried him under a bulk of incommodi ties s uch as nobody will care to rid him of. Here, likew ise--the germ of the wrinkle-browed, grizzly-bearded, careworn merchant--we have the smart young clerk , who gets the taste of traffic as a wolf-cub does of blood, and already sends adventures in his master's ships, when he had better be sailing mimic boats upon a m ill-pond. Ano t her figure in the scene is the outward-bound sailor, in quest of a protection; or the recently arrived one, pale and f eeble, seeking a passport to the hospital. Nor must we f orget the captains of the rusty little schooners that br ing fir ewood from the British provinces; a rough-l ooking set of tarpaulins, without the alertness of the Yankee aspect, but contributing an item of no slight importance to our decaying trade. Cluster all these individuals togeth er, as they sometimes were, with other miscellaneous ones to diversify the group, and, for the time b ein g, it made the Custom-House a stirring scene. More frequently, however, on ascending the steps, you would discern-- in the entry if it w ere summer time, or in their appropriate rooms if wintry or inclement weathers--a row of venerable f igures, sitting in old-fashioned chairs, w hich were tip ped on their hind legs back against the wall. Oftentimes they were asleep, but occasionally might be heard talking toge ther, in voices between a speech and a snore, and with t hat lack of energy that distinguishes the occup ants o f alms-houses, and all other human beings w ho depend for subsistence on charity, on monopolized labour, or anything else but their own independent exertions. These old gentleme n--sea ted, like Matthew at the receipt of custom, but not very liable to be summoned thence, like him, f or apo stolic errands--were Custom-House officers . Furthermore, on the left hand as you enter the front door, is a certain room or office, about fifteen feet square, and of a lofty height, with t wo of its arched windows commanding a vie w of the aforesaid dilapidated wharf, and the th ird loo king across a narrow lane, and along a porti on of Derby Str eet. All three give glimpses of the shops of grocers, block-makers, slop-sellers, and ship-chandlers, around the doors of which are ge nerally to be seen, laughing and gossiping, clusters of old salts, and such other wharf-r ats as haunt the Wapping of a seaport. The ro om itself is cobw ebbed, and dingy with old paint; its floor is strewn with grey sand, in a fashion that has elsewhere fallen into long disuse; and it is eas y to conclude, from the general slovenlines s of the place, that this is a sanctuary int o whi ch womankind, with her tools of magic, the broom an d mop, has very i nfrequent access. In the way of furniture, there is a stove with a voluminous funnel; an old pine desk with a three-legged stool be side it ; two or three wooden-bottom chairs, excee dingly decrepit and infirm; and--not to fo rget th e library--on some shelves, a score or two of volu mes of the Acts of Congress, and a bulky Digest of the Revenue laws. A tin pipe ascends through the ceiling, and forms a medium of vocal commu nication with other parts of the edifice. And here, some six months ago--pacing f rom c orner to corner, or lounging on the long-legged s tool, with his elbo w on the desk, and his eyes w ander ing up and down the columns of the morning newspaper--you might have reco gnised , honoured reader, the same individu al who welcomed you into his cheery litt le study, where the sunshine glimmered so pleasa ntly through the wi llo w br an ch es on the western side of the Old Manse. But now, should you go thither to see k him, you would inquire in vain for th e Locofoco Surveyor. The besom o f ref orm hath swept him out of office, and a worthier succes sor wears his dignity a nd pockets his emoluments. This old town of Salem--my native plac e, tho ugh I have dwelt much away from it b oth in boyhood and maturer years- -posse sses, or did possess, a hold on my affection, the force of which I have never realiz e d d uring my seasons of actual residence here. Indeed, so far as its physical as pect is concerned, with its flat, unva ried surface, covered chiefly with w ooden houses, few or none of which pretend to architectural bea uty--its irregularity, which is neither picturesque nor quaint, but only tame--its long and lazy street, lounging wearisomely through the whole extent of the p eninsula, with Gallows Hill and New Guinea at one end, and a view of the alms-house at the other--such being the features of m y n ative town, it would be quite as reasonable to form a sentimental attachm ent to a disarranged checker-board. And yet, though invariably happiest elsew here, there is within me a feeling for Old Salem, which, in lack o f a better phrase, I must be content to call affection. The sentimen t is probably assignable to the deep and aged roots which my family h as stuck into the soil. It is now nearly two centuries and a quarter since th e origi nal Briton, the earliest emigrant of my name, made his appear ance in the wild and forest-bordered settlement which has since becom e a city. And here his descendants have been born and died , and have mingled their earthly substance with the soil, until no small portio n of it must necessarily be akin t o the mortal frame wherewith, for a li ttle while, I walk the streets. In part, therefore, the attachment wh i c h I speak of is the mere sensuous sympathy of dust fo r dust. Few of my countrymen can know what it is; nor, as frequent transplanta tio n is perhaps better for the st ock, need they consider it desir ab le to know. But the sentiment has likewise its moral quality. The f i g ure of that first ancestor, invested by family tradition w ith a dim and dusky grandeur, was present to my boyish imagination as far b ack as I can remember. It still hau nts me, and induces a sort o f home-feeling with the past, which I scarcely claim in reference to th e pr esent phase of the town. I seem to have a stronger claim to a residence here on account of this grave, bearded, sable-cloaked, and st eeple-c rowned progenitor--who ca me so early, with his Bibl e and his sword, and trode the unworn street with such a stately port, and ma de so large a figure, as a man of war and peace--a stronger cla im than for myself, whose name is seldom heard and my face hardly known. He w as a soldier, legislator, judge ; he was a ruler in the Chu rch; he had all the Puritanic traits, both good and evil. He was likewise a bi tt er persecutor; as witness the Quakers, who have rememb ered him in their histories, and relate an incident of his hard severity towards a woma n of their sect, which will l ast longer, it is to be feare d, th an any record of his better deeds, although these were many. His son , to o, i nherited the persecuting spirit, and made himself so consp icuous in the martyrdom of the witches, that their blood may fairly be said to have left a stain upon him. So deep a stain, indeed, that his dry old bones, in the Charter-street burial-ground, must still retain it, if they have not crumbled utterly to dust! I know not whether these ancestors of mine bethought themselves to repent, and ask pardon of Heaven for their cruel ties; or whether they are now groaning under the he avy consequences of them in another state of being. At all events, I, the p resent writer, as their representative, hereby take shame upon myself for their sakes, and pray that any curse incurred by them--as I have heard, and as the drea ry an d unprosperous conditi on of the race, for ma ny a lo ng year back, would argue to exist--may be now and henceforth remo ved. Doubtless, however, either of these stern and black-browed Puritans would have thought it quite a sufficient retribution for his sins that, after so long a lapse of y ears, the old trunk of the family tree, with so m uch ve nerable moss upon it, should have borne, as its topmost bough, an i dler like myself. No aim that I have ever cherished would they recognise as laud able; no success of mine--if my life, beyond its domestic scope, had ever been brightene d b y success--would th ey deem otherwise tha n worthless, if not positively disgraceful. "What is he?" murmurs one gr ey shadow of my forefathers to the other. "A writer of story books! What kind of business in life--what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind in his day an d generation--may t hat be? Why, the deg enerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler!" Such are the compliment s bandied between my great grandsires and myself, across the gulf of time! And y et, let them scorn me as they will, strong traits of their nature have intertwined the mselve s with mine. Planted deep, in the town' s earl iest infancy and childhood, by these two earnest and energetic men, the ra ce has ever since subsisted here; always, too, in respectability; never, so far as I ha ve known, disgraced by a single unworthy member; but seldom or never, on the oth er hand, after the first t wo generations, p erformi ng any memorable deed, or so much as putting forward a claim to pub lic notice. Gradually, they have sunk almost out of sight; as old houses, here and ther e about the streets, get covered half-way to the eaves by the accumulation of new soil. From father to son, for above a hundre d yea rs, they followed the sea; a grey-headed shipmaster, in each generati on, retiring from the quarter-deck to the homestead, while a boy of fourteen took the he reditary place before the mast, confronting the salt spray and the gale which had blust ered against his sire and grandsire. The boy, also in due time, passed from the forecastle to the cabin, spent a t empestuous manhood, and returned from his world-w anderings, to grow old, and die, and mingle his dust with the natal earth. This long connexion of a family with o ne spot , as its place of birth and burial, cr eates a kindred between the human being and the locality, quite indepen dent of any charm in the scenery or moral circumstan ce s that surround him. It is not love but instinct. The new inhabitant--who came himself from a foreign land, or whose father or grandfather came-- has little claim to be called a Salemite; he has no conception of the oys ter-like tenacity with which an old sett ler, over wh om his third cent ury is creeping, clings to the spot where his successive generations have been embe dded. It is no matt er that the plac e is joy less for him; that he is weary of the old wooden houses, the mud and d ust, the dead level of site and sentime nt, the c hill ea st wind, and the chille st of social atmospheres;--all these, and whatever faults besides he may see or imagin e, are nothing to the purpose. The sp ell survives, and just as powerfully as if the natal spot were an earthly par adise. So has it been in my case. I felt it almo st as a destiny to mak e Salem my home; so that the mould of features and cast of character which had all along been familiar here--ever, as on e representative of the race lay down in the grave, another assuming, as it we re, his sentry-march along the main str eet--migh t st ill in my little day b e seen and recognised in the old town. Nevertheless, this very sentiment is an evide nce tha t the connexi on, which has be come an unhealthy one, should at last be severed. Human nature will no t flourish, any more than a potato, if it be pl anted and r e-planted, for too lon g a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birth-p lac es, and, so far as this fortu nes ma y be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed eart h. On emerging from the Old Manse, it wa s chiefly this s trange, indolent, unjoyous attachment for my native town that brought me to fill a place in Uncle Sam's brick edifice, w hen I might as well, or bette r, hav e gone somewhere else. My doom was on me. It was not the first time, nor the second, that I had gone away--as it seemed , permanently--but yet retu rned, like the bad halfpenny, or as if Salem were for me the inevitable centre of the uni ver se. So, one fi ne morning I a s cended the flight of granite steps, with the President's commission in m y pocket, and was introduced to the corp s of gentle men who were to aid me in my weighty responsibility as chief executive officer of the Custom-House. I doubt gr eatly--o r, rather, I do not doubt a t all--whether any public functionary of the United States, either in the civil or military line, has ever had such a p a triarchal b ody of veterans under his or ders as myself. The whereabouts of the Oldest Inhabitant was at once settled when I look ed at them. For upward s of twenty years before this epoch, the independent position of the Collector had kept the Salem Custom-House ou t of the whirlp ool of political vicissitude, wh ich makes the tenure of office generally so fragile. A soldier--New England's most d ist inguished so ldier--he st ood firm ly on the pedestal of his gallant services; and, himself secure in the wi se liberality of the successive admin i str ations throu gh which he had held office, he had been the safety of his subordinates in many an hour of danger and heart-quake . General Mill er was radi cally conservative; a man over whose kindly nature habit had no slight infl uence; attaching himself strongly to fa m iliar faces, and with difficulty moved to chan ge, even when change might have brought unquestionable improvement. Thus, on taki ng c harge of my departme nt, I found few but aged men. They were ancient sea-captains, for the m ost part, who, after being tossed on eve r y s ea, and stan ding up sturdily against life 's tempestuous blast, had finally drifted into this quiet nook, where, with little to dist urb the m, except the periodi cal terrors of a Presidential election, they one and all acquired a new lea se of existence. Though by no means less liabl e than thei r fellow-men to age and infi rmity, they had evidently some talisman or other that kept death at bay. Two or th ree of their nu mber, as I was assured, being gouty and rheumatic, or perhaps bed-ridden, never dre amed of making their appearance at th e Cus tom-Hous e during a large part of the y ear; but, after a torpid winter, would creep out into the warm sunshine of May or Ju n e, go lazily about wh at they t ermed duty, and, at their own leisure and convenience, betake themsel ves to bed again. I must plead guilty t o the charge of abbreviating the official breat h of more than one of these venerable servants of the republic. They were allowed, on my repr esentation , to rest from their arduous labours, and soon afterwards--as if their sole pr inciple of life had been zeal for their c ountry's service-- as I verily believe it was--withdr ew to a better world. It is a pious consolation to me that, through my interference, a su fficient s pace was al lowed them for repentance of the evil and corrupt practices into which, as a matter of course, every Custom -H ouse offi cer must b e supposed to fall. Neither th e front nor the back entrance of the Custom-House opens on the road to Paradise . The gr eater pa rt of my of fi cers were Whigs. It was well for their venerable brotherhood that the ne w Surveyor was not a politician, and t ho ugh a fa ithful Demo crat in principle, neither receiv ed nor held his office with any reference to political services. Had it been otherwise --had an activ e politici an be en put into this influential post, to assume the easy task of making he ad against a Whig Collector, whose inf ir mities with held him fro m the personal administratio n of his office--hardly a man of the old corps would have drawn the breath of offic ial life with in a mon th after the exterminating angel had come up the Custom-House steps. Acco rding to the received code in such mat te rs, it woul d have bee n nothing short of duty, in a politician, to bring every one of those white heads under the axe of the guillotin e . It was pl ain enoug h to discern that the old fellows dreaded some such discourtesy at my ha nds. It pained, and at the same time a mused me, to behold t he terrors that attended my a dvent, to see a furrowed cheek, weather-beaten by half a century of storm, tur n ash y pale a t the glanc e of so harmless an individual as myself; to detect, as one or another add ressed me, the tremor of a voice w hi ch, in long- past days, h ad been wont to bellow through a speaking-trumpet, hoarsely enough to frighten Boreas himself to silence. They kn ew, the se excelle nt old persons, that, by all established rule--and, as regarded some of them , weighed by their own lack of effic i ency for busi ness--they ou ght to have given place to youn ger men, more orthodox in politics, and altogether fitter than themselves to se rve our com mon Un cle. I k new it, too, but could never quite find in my heart to act upon the knowledge. Much and deservedly to my own discredit, therefore, and considerably to the detrim ent of my official conscience, they continued, during my incumbency, to creep ab out the wh arves, a nd loit er up and down the Custom-House steps. They spent a good deal of time, also, asleep in their accusto med corners, with their chairs ti lted back against the walls; awaking, however, once or twice in the forenoon, to bore one another with the se veral tho usandth r ep etition of old sea-stories and mouldy jokes, that had grown to be pa sswords and countersigns among the m . The discovery was soon ma de, I imagine, that the new Surveyor had no great harm in him. So, with lightsome hearts and the happy cons ciousne ss of being usefully employed--in their own behalf at least, if not for our beloved country--these good old gentlemen wen t through the va rious formal ities of office. Sagaciously under their spectacles, did they peep into the holds of vessels. Mighty was their fu ss abo ut little m att ers, and marvellous, sometimes, the obtuseness that allowed great er ones to slip between their fingers W henever such a m ischance oc curred--when a waggon-loa d of valuable merchandise had been smuggled ashore, at noonday, perhap s, a nd direc tly bene ath the ir unsuspicious noses--nothing could exceed the vigilance and ala crity with which they proceeded to l ock, and double-loc k, and secure with tape and sealing-wax, all t he avenues of the delinquent vessel. Instead of a reprimand for their previou s negligen ce, the case s eemed rather to require an eulogium on their praiseworthy cautio n after the mischief had happened ; a grateful recognition o f the promp titude of their zeal the momen t that there was no longer any remedy. Unless people are more than comm on ly disagr eeable, it is my foolish habit to contract a kindness for them. The better part of my companion's character, if it h ave a better part, is that wh ich usually comes uppermost in my rega rd, and forms the type whereby I recognise the man. As most of these old Custo m-Hous e officers h ad good traits, and as my position in reference to them, being pat ernal and protective, was favourabl e to the growth of friend ly sentiments, I soon grew to like them all. It was pleasant in the summer forenoons--when the fervent heat, that almo st lique fied th e rest of t he human family, merely communicated a genial warmth to their ha If torpid systems--it was pleasant to h ear them chatting in the back entry, a st the wall, as usual; while the frozen witticisms of past generations were tha wed out, and cam e bubbl ing with laughter from their lips. Externally, the jollity of aged men has much in common with the m irth of children; the inte llect, any mo re than a deep sense of hum our, has little to do with the matter; it is, with both, a gleam that plays up on the surf ace, and impa rts a sunny and cheery aspect alike to the green branch and gr ey, mouldering trunk. In one case, h owever, it is real sunshine; in the other, it more resembles the phosph orescent glow of decaying wood. It would be sad injustice, the reader mu st unders tand, to re pr esent all my excellent old friends as in their dotage. In the first pl ace, my coadjutors were not invari ably old; there were men amo ng them in t heir strength and prime, of mar ked ability and energy, and altogether superior to the sluggish and d epende nt mode of life on w hich their evil stars had cast them. Then, moreover, the white lo cks of age were sometimes found t o be the thatch of an intellectua l tenemen t in good repair. But, as respe cts the majority of my corps of veterans, there will be no wrong done if I ch aracteriz e them ge nera lly as a set of wearisome old souls, who had gathered nothi ng worth preservation from their varie d experience of life. They seemed t o have flu ng away all the golden grain o f practical wisdom, which they had enjoyed so many opportunities of ha rv esting, an d most c arefully to have stored their memory with the husks. They spoke with far more interest and unction of thei r morning's breakfast, or yeste rday's, to-da y's, or tomorrow's dinner, than of the shipwreck of forty or fifty years ago, and all the world's wonders w hich they h ad witnes sed w ith their youthful eyes. The father of the Custom-House--th e patriarch, not only of this little squ a d of officials, but, I am bold to s ay, of the r espectable body of tide-waite rs all over the United States--was a certain permanent Inspector. H e m ight truly be termed a l egitimate son of the revenue system, dyed in the wool , or r ather bo rn in th e purple ; sinc e his sir e, a Rev olutiona r y colonel, and fo rmerly collector o f the port, had created an office for him, and appointed him to fill it, a t a perio d of the early ages which few living men can now remem ber. This Inspector, when I first knew him, was a m an of f ourscore years, or th ereab outs, and certainly one of the m o st wonderf ul specimens of winter-green that you would be likely to discover in a lifetime's search. With his florid cheek, his co mpact figure smartly arrayed in a bright-buttoned bl ue coat, his brisk and vigorou s step, and his hale and heart y aspect, a ltogether h e seemed--not young, indeed--but a kind of ne w contrivanc e of Mothe r Nat ure in the shape of man, whom age and infi rmit y had no business to touch. His voice and lau gh, which p erpetually re- echoed through the Custom-Hou se, had nothing of the tremulous quaver and cackl e of an old man's utterance; they came s trutting out of his lungs, like the c row of a cock, or the blast of a clarion. L ooking at h im merely as an animal--and there was v ery lit tle else to ook at--he wa s a mo st satisfactory object, from the thoro ugh health f ulness and wholesomeness of his system, and his capacity , at tha t extreme age, to enjoy all, or nea rly al l, the delig hts w hich he h ad ev er aimed at or conceived of. Th e careless sec urity of his lif e in the Custom-House, on a re gular income, and with but ent apprehensions of remo val, ha d no doubt contributed to m ake ti me pass lightl y over him. The original and more potent cau ses , however, lay in t he latter qualities, ind an imal nature, th e m oderate proportion of intellect, and the ver y trifling adm ixture of moral a nd spiritual ingredients; the se o tro uble measure to keep the old g entleman from walking on all -four s. He posses sed no power o f thoug ht, no depth of feeling, n or of his ph ysical hort , bu t a few commonplace instincts, which, aided by the cheerful te mper w hich grew inevitably out ather of twenty chil ly, and to gener al acceptance, in lieu of a heart. H e had been the hus band of three wi ve s, all long since dead; the f ue the sunniest childhood or maturi ty, had likewise returned to dust . Here, one would sup pose, might have b een sorrow enough to imb iscences. The nex a sable tinge. No t s o with our old Inspector. One brief si gh sufficed to c arry off the entire b urde n of these dismal remin t moment he was as ready for sport as any unbreeched i nfa nt: far readier than the Collecto r's junior clerk, who at nineteen years was m uch the elder and graver man of the two. I used to watch and study this patriarchal personage with, I think, livelier curiosity than any other form of humanity there presented to my notice. He was, in truth, a rare phenomenon ; so perfect, in one point of vie w; so shallow, so de lusive, so impalpa ble su ch an absolute nonentity , in every other. My conclusion was that he had no soul, n o heart, no mind; n oth ing, as I have already said, but i nstincts; and yet, wi thal, so cunningly ha d the few materials of his character been p ut together that there was no painful p erception of defic ien cy, but, on my part, an enti re cont entment with what I found in him. It might be difficult--and it was so--to conceiv e how he should exist hereafter, so e arthly and sens uo us did he seem; but surely his ex istence here, admi tting that it was to ter minate with his last breath , had bee n not unkindly given; with no highe r moral re spo nsibilities than the beasts of t he field, but with a lar ger scope of enjoym ent tha n theirs, and with al l their blessed immunity from the dr eariness and duskiness o f age. One point in whic h he had vastly the ad van tage over his four-fo oted brethren was his ability t o recollect the good dinne rs which it had made n o small portion of the hap piness of his life to e at. His gourmandism was a hi ghly agreeable trait ; and t o hear him talk of roas t meat was as appetizing a s a pickle or an oys ter. As he possesse d n o higher attribute, an d ne ither sacrificed nor viti ated any spiritual endow ment b y devoting all hi s energies and ingenuities to subs erve the delight and profit of his maw, it always plea sed an d satisfied me to hear him expati ate o n fish, poultry, and butcher' s meat, and the most eligib le methods of pre paring them for the table. His rem ains is cences of goo d chee r, however ancient the dat e of the actual banquet, seeme d to bring the savo ur of pig or turke y unde r one's very nostrils. There were flavours on his palate th at had lingered there not le ss than sixty or seventy years, and were still apparently as fresh as that o f the m utton chop which he had ju st devoure d f or his breakfast. I have heard hi m smack his lips over dinners , ev ery guest at which, exc ept himself, had long been food for worms. It was marvel lous to observe how the ghosts of bygone meals were continually rising up bef ore him- -n ot in a nger o r retribution, but as if grateful f or his former appreciation, and see king to reduplicate an endless series of enjoyment, at o nce shadowy and sensual: a tenderloin of beef, a hind-quarter of vea l, a spare-r ib of pork, a particular chicken, o r a remar k ably praise worthy turkey, which had perha ps adorned his board in the days of the el der Adams, woul d be remembered; while all the subse quent experience of our race, and all the events that brightened or darke ned his indivi dual career, had gone over him with as little p er mane nt effect as the passing breeze. Th e chief tragic event of the old man' s life, s o far as I could ju dge, was his mishap with a certain g oose, which lived and di ed so me twenty or forty years ago: a go ose of most promising figure, but which, a t table , proved so inveterately tough, that th e carving-knife would make no imp ressi on on its carcase, and it could only be divided with an axe and handsaw. But it is ti m e to quit this sket ch; on which , however, I should be glad to d well at c o nsiderably more length, because of all me n whom I have ever known, this indivi dual was fitt e st to be a Custom-House officer. Mo st persons, owing to cause s w hi ch I may not hav e space to hi nt at, suffer moral detriment from this p eculiar mode of life. The old Inspector wa s incapable of it; and, were he to continu e in of fice to the end of time, would be just as good as he was then, and sit do wn to dinner with just a s good an a ppetite. There is one likeness, wi thou t w hich my gallery of Custom-House portra its would be strangely incomplete, but w hich m y comp aratively few opportunities for observa tion enable me to sketch o nl y i n the merest outlin e. It is that o f the Collector, our gallant old Ge neral , w ho, after his brilliant military service, s ubsequently to which he had ruled over a wild Weste rn territory, had come hither, twenty y ears before, to spend the d ec lin e of his varied and h onourable life . The brave soldier had already nu mbere d , n early or quite, his three-score years a nd ten, and was pursuing the remainder of hi s earthly march, burdened with infirmiti es which even the martial m us ic of his own spirit-stirr ing recollectio ns could do little towards lightening . The ste p was palsied now, that had been fore most in the charge. It was only with the assista nce of a servant, and by leaning his hand heavily on the iron balustrade, that he c ould slowly and painfully ascend the Cust om-House steps, and, with a toi lsome p r ogress across the floor, attain his cu stomary chair beside the fireplace. There he u sed to si t, gazing with a somewhat dim serenit y of aspect at the figures that ca m e and went, amid the r ustle of papers , the administering of oaths, th e disc u s sion of business, and the casual talk of the office; all which sounds and circumstan ces seem ed but indistinctly to impress his sens es, and hardly to make their way i nt o his inner sphere of contemplatio n. His countenance, in this repo se, wa s mild and kindly. If his notice was sou ght, an expression of courtesy and interest gleamed out upon his features, proving that ther e was light within him, and that it was only the outwa rd medium of the intellectual lamp that obstru cted the rays in their passage. The closer you p enetrated to the substance of his mind, the sounder it appeared. When no longer called u pon to speak or listen--either of w hich operations cost him an eviden t effort--his face would briefly s ubside into its former not uncheerful quietude. It was not painful to behold this look; for, though dim, it ha d not the imbecility of decaying age. The framework of his nature, ori ginally strong and ma ssive, was not yet crumpled into ruin. To o bserve and define his character, however, under such disadvantages, was as difficult a task as to trace ou t and build up anew, in imagination, a n old fortress, like Ticonderoga, from a view of its grey and broken ruin s. Here and there, perchance , the walls may remain almost complete; but elsewhere may be only a shapeless mound, cumbrous with its very strength, and overgrown, through long years of peace and neglect, with grass and alien we eds. Nevertheles s, looking at the old warrio r with affection--for, slight as was the communication between us, my feeling towards him, li ke that of al l bipeds and quadrupeds who knew him , might not improperly be termed s o --I could discern the mai n points of his p o rtrait. It was marked with t he noble and heroic qualities which showed it to be not a mere accident, but of go od right, tha t he had won a distinguished name. His spirit could never, I conceive, h a ve been characterized by an u neasy activity; it must, at any period of his l ife, have required an impulse to set him in motion; but once stirred u p, wit h obstacl es to overcome, and an adequate ob ject to be attained, it was not in the m an to give out or fail. The he at that had form e rly pervaded his nature, an d which was not yet extinct, was never of the kind t hat flashes and flick ers in a blaze; but rather a deep red glow, as of iron in a furnace. Weight, solidit y , f irmness--this was the expr ession of his re p ose, even in such decay as h ad crept untimely over him at the period of which I s peak. But I cou ld imagine , even th en, that, under some excitement whic h should go deeply into his consc i sness--roused by a trumpe t's peal, loud en ou gh to awaken all of his energ ies that were not dead, but only slumbering--he was yet capable of fl inging off his infirm ities like a sick man's gown, dropping the staff of age to seize a battle-s wo rd, and starting up once mo re a warrior. An d, in so intense a moment h is demeanour would have still been calm. Such a n exhibition, h owever, was but to be pictur ed in fancy; not to be anticipated, no r desired. What I saw in him--as evi ntly as the indestructible ra mparts of Old Ticonderoga, already cite d as the most appropriate simile--was the featur es of stubborn and ponderous endurance, which might well have amounted to obstinacy in his earlier days; of integrit y, that, like most of his other en dowments, la y in a somewhat heavy ma ss, and was just as unmalleable or unmanagea ble as a ton of ir on ore; and of benevolence which, fiercely as he led the bayon ets on at Chippewa or Fort Erie, I take t o be quite as genuine a stamp as what actua tes any or all the polemical philanthropists of the age. He had slain men wit h his own hand, f or aug ht I know--certainl y, they had fallen like blades of gra ss at the sweep of the scythe before th e charge to which his spirit impart ed its triumpha n t energy--but, be that as i t might, there was never in his heart so much cru elty as would have bru shed the dow n off a butterfly's wing. I have not k nown the man to whose innate kindlin es s I would more confidently make an appeal. Ma ny characteristics--and thos e, too, which contribute not the least forcibly to impart resemblance in a sketch--must have vanished, or been obscured, before I met the Gene ra l. All merely graceful attributes are usually the m ost evanescent; nor doe s nature adorn the human ruin with blossoms of new beauty, that ha v e their roots and proper nutriment onl y in the chinks and crevices of decay, as she sows wall-flowers over the ruined fortress of Ticonderoga. Still, eve n in respect of grace and beauty, there were points well worth noting. A r ay of h umour, now and then, would make i ts way through the veil of dim obstruction and glimmer pleasantly upon our faces. A trait , seen in the masculine character after childho od or early youth, was shown i n t he Ge neral's fondness for the sight and frag rance of flowers. An old soldier might be su p o f native elegance, seldom posed to prize only the bloody laure l on his brow ; but here was one who seemed to have a young girl's appreciation of t he floral tribe. There, beside the firep lace, the brave old General used to s it; while the Surveyor--though seldom, whe n it could be avoided, taking upon him self the difficul t t ask of engaging him in con versation--was fond of standing at a d istance, and watching his quiet a nd almost slumberous countenance. He m but a few yards off; remote, thou gh we passed c los e beside his chair; unattaina ble, though we might have stretched f orth our hands and touched his ow n. It might be that he lived a more real propriate environment of the Collec tor's office. The evolutions of the parade; the tum ult of the battle; the flourish of old heroic music, heard thirty years before--such scenes and sounds, per nse. Meanwhile, the merchants and ship-masters, the spruce clerks and uncouth sailors, entered and departed ; the bustle of his commercial and Cus tom-House life kept up its little mur n nor their affairs did the General ap pear to sustain th e most distant relation. He was as much out of place as an old sword--now rusty, but which had flashe d once in the battle's front, and sho have been among the inkstands , paper-folders , and mahogany rulers on the Deputy Collector's desk. There wa s one thing that much aided me in renewi ng and re-creating the stalwart s nd simple energy. It was the r ec ollection of t hose memorable words of his--"I'll try, S ir"--spoken on the very v erge of a desperate and heroic enterprise , and breathing the soul and s ing all perils, and encounteri ng all. If, in our co untry, valour were rewarded by herald ic honour, this phrase --which it seems so easy to speak, but w hic h only he, with such a task o ken--would be the best and fit test of all mottoes for the General's s hield of arms. It contributes greatly to wards a man's moral and intellectual health to be brought into habits of companionship w it h individuals unlike himself, who c ar e little for his pursuits, and whose sphere and abilities he must go out of himself to appreciate. The acc idents of my life hav e often afforded me th i s advan tage, but never with more fulness and variety than during m y continuance in office. There was one man, especially, the observati on of whose character gave me a new id ea of talent. His gifts were emphatically th ose of a man of b usiness; prompt, acute, cle ar - minded; with an eye that saw th ro ugh all perplexities, and a fa culty of arrangement that made them vanish as by the waving of an enchanter 's wand. Bred up from b oyhood in the Cus to m-House, it was his prop er field of activity; and the ma ny intricacies of business, so ha rassing to the interloper, pre sented themselves before him with the regularity of a perfectly comprehende d system. In my contemp lation, he stood as the ideal of his class. He was, indeed, the Custom-House in him self; or, at all events, the main sp ring that kept its variously rev olving wheels in motion; for, in an institution like this, where its officers are appointed to subserve t heir own profit and convenience, and seldom with a leading reference to their fitness for the duty to be performed, the y must perforce seek elsewhere the dexterity which is not in them. Thus, by an inevitable necessity, as a magnet attracts steel-f ilings, so did our ma n of business draw to himself the difficulties which everybody met w ith. With an easy condescensio nd kind forbearance towards ou r stupidity--which, to his order of mind, must have seemed little sh or t of crime--would he fo rth-with, by the mere st touch of his finger, make the incomprehensible as clear as d n, a not less than we, his esoteric fri ends. His integrity was perfect; it was a law of nature with him, rather than a choice or a principle; nor can it be otherwise than the main condition of an intellect so remarkabl aylight. The merchants valued h im nest and regular in the administr ation of affairs. A stain on his conscience, as to an ything that came within t he range of his voca y clear and accurate as his to be rror in the balance of an account, o r an ink-blot on the fair page of a book of record . Here, in a word--and it is a ra re instance in my life- -I had met with a person thoroughly adapted to the situatio n which he held. Such were some he people with whom I now found myself c o nnected. I took it in good part, at the hands o f Providence, that I was thrown into a position so little aki n to my past habits; and s et myself seriously to gath er from it whatever profit was to be had. After my fellowship of toil and impracticable sche mes with the dreamy brethren of Brook F arm; after living for three years within the subtle influe n ce o f an i nte llect li ke E me rso n's; after those wild, free days on t he Assabeth, indulging fantastic speculations, beside our fire of fallen boughs, with Ellery Channin g; after talking with Thoreau a bout pine-trees and India n r e l ic s i n h i s hermitage at Walden; after growing f tidious by sympathy with the classic refinement of Hillard's culture; after becoming imbued with po etic sentiment at Longfellow 's hearthstone--it was time, at length, that I should exe rc is e o t he r faculties of my nature, and nourish m elf with food for which I had hitherto had little appetite. Even the old Inspector was desirable, as a c hange of diet, to a man who ys had known Alcott. I looked upon it as an evidence, in some measure, of a system naturally well balanced, and lacking no essent ial part of a thorough orga nization, that, with such ass ociates to remember, I could mingle at o nce with men of