

The Haunted Quack

Nathaniel Hawthorne

Table of Contents

<u>The Haunted Quack</u>	1
<u>Nathaniel Hawthorne</u>	1

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In the summer of 18 ,I made an excursion to Niagara. At Schenectady, finding the roads nearly impassable, I took passage in a canal-boat for Utica. The weather was dull and lowering. There were but few passengers on board; and of those few, none were sufficiently inviting in appearance to induce me to make any overtures to a travelling acquaintance. A stupid answer, or a surly monosyllable, were all that I got in return for the few simple questions I hazarded. An occasional drizzling rain, and the wet and slippery condition of the tow-path, along which the lazy beasts that dragged the vessel travelled, rendered it impossible to vary the monotony of the scene by walking. I had neglected to provide myself with books, and as we crept along at the dull rate of four miles per hour, I soon felt the foul fiend *Ennui* coming upon me with all her horrors.

"Time and the hour," however, "runs through the roughest day," and night at length approached. By degrees the passengers, seemingly tired of each other's company, began to creep slowly away to their berths; most of them fortifying themselves with a potation, before resigning themselves to the embrace of Morpheus. One called for a glass of hot whisky punch, because he felt cold; another took some brandy toddy to prevent his taking cold; some took mint juleps; some gin slings, and some rum and water. One took his dram because he felt sick; another, to make him sleep well; and a third, because he had nothing else to do. The last who retired from the cabin was an old gentleman who had been deeply engaged in a well-thumbed volume all day, and whose mental abstraction I had more than once envied. He now laid down his book, and, pulling out a red nightcap, called for a pint of beer, to take the vapors out of his head.

As soon as he had left the cabin, I took up the volume, and found it to be Glanville's marvellous book, entitled, "The History of Witches, or the Wonders of the Invisible World Displayed." I began to peruse it, and soon got so deeply interested in some of his wonderful narrations, that the hours slipped unconsciously away, and midnight found me poring half asleep over the pages. From this dreary state, I was suddenly aroused by a muttering, as of a suppressed voice, broken by groans and sounds of distress. Upon looking round, I saw that they proceeded from the figure of a man enveloped in a cloak, who was lying asleep upon one of the benches of the cabin, whom I had not previously noticed. I recognized him to be a young man, with whose singular appearance and behavior, during the day, I had been struck. He was tall and thin in person, rather shabbily dressed, with long, lank, black hair, and large gray eyes, which gave a visionary character to one of the most pallid and cadaverous countenances I had ever beheld. Since he had come on board, he had appeared restless and unquiet, keeping away from the table at meal-times, and seeming averse from entering into conversation with the passengers. Once or twice, on catching my eye, he had slunk away as if, conscience-smitten by the remembrance of some crime, he dreaded to meet the gaze of a fellow-mortal. From this behavior I suspected that he was either a fugitive from justice, or else a little disordered in mind; and had resolved to keep my eye on him, and observe what course he should take when we reached Utica.

Supposing that the poor fellow was now under the influence of nightmare, I got up with the intention of giving him a shake, to rouse him, when the words "murder, poison," and others of extraordinary import, dropping unconnectedly from his lips, induced me to stay my hand. "Go away, go away," exclaimed he, as if conscious of my approach, but mistaking me for another. "Why do you continue to torment me? If I did poison you, I didn't mean to do it, and they can't make that out more than manslaughter. Besides, what's the use of haunting me now?"

The Haunted Quack

An't I going to give myself up, and tell all? Begone! I say, you bloody old hag, begone!" Here the bands of slumber were broken by the intensity of his feelings, and with a wild expression of countenance, and a frame shaking with emotion, he started from the bench, and stood trembling before me.

Though convinced that he was a criminal, I could not help pitying him, from the forlorn appearance he now exhibited. As soon as he had collected his wandering ideas, it seemed as if he read in my countenance the mingled sentiments of pity and abhorrence with which I regarded him. Looking anxiously around, and seeing that we were alone, he drew the corner of the bench towards me, and sitting down, with an apparent effort to command his feelings, thus addressed me. His tone of voice was calm and distinct; and his countenance, though deadly pale, was composed.

"I see, sir, that from what I am conscious of having uttered in my disturbed sleep, you suspect me of some horrid crime. You are right. My conscience convicts me, and an awful nightly visitation, worse than the waking pangs of remorse, compels me to confess it. Yes, I am a murderer. I have been the unhappy cause of blotting out the life of a fellow-being from the page of human existence. In these pallid features, you may read enstamped, in the same characters which the first murderer bore upon his brow, Guilt guilt guilt!"

Here the poor young man paused, evidently agitated by strong internal emotion. Collecting himself, however, in a few moments, he thus continued:

"Yet still, when you have heard my sad story, I think you will bestow upon me your pity. I feel that there is no peace for me, until I have disburdened my mind. Your countenance promises sympathy. Will you listen to my unhappy narrative?"

My curiosity being strongly excited by this strange exordium, I told him I was ready to hear whatever he had to communicate. Upon this, he proceeded as follows:

"My name is Hippocrates Jenkins. I was born in Nantucket, but my father emigrated to these parts when I was young. I grew up in one of the most flourishing villages on the borders of the canal. My father and mother both dying of the lake fever, I was bound apprentice to an eminent operative in the boot and shoe making line, who had lately come from New York. Would that I had remained content with this simple and useful profession. Would that I had stuck to my waxed-ends and awl, and never undertaken to cobble up people's bodies. But my legs grew tired of being trussed beneath my haunches; my elbows wearied with their monotonous motion; my eyes became dim with gazing forever upon the dull brick wall which faced our shop window; and my whole heart was sick of my sedentary, and, as I foolishly deemed it, particularly mean occupation. My time was nearly expired, and I had long resolved, should any opportunity offer of getting into any other employment, I would speedily embrace it.

"I had always entertained a predilection for the study of medicine. What had given my mind this bias I know not. Perhaps it was the perusal of an old volume of Dr. Buchan, over whose pages it was the delight of my youthful fancy to pore. Perhaps it was the oddness of my Christian cognomen, which surely was given me by my parents in a prophetic hour. Be this as it may, the summit of my earthly happiness was to be a doctor. Conceive, then, my delight and surprise, one Saturday evening, after having carried home a pair of new white-topped boots for Doctor Ephraim Ramshorne, who made the cure of bodies his care, in the village, to hear him ask me how I should like to be a doctor. He then very generously offered to take me as a student. From my earliest recollections, the person and character of Doctor Ramshorne had been regarded by me with the most profound and awful admiration. Time out of mind the successful practitioner for many miles around, I had looked upon him as the *beau idéal* of a doctor a very Apollo in the healing art. When I speak of him, however, as the *successful* practitioner, I mean it not to be inferred that death was less busy in his doings, or funerals scarcer during his dynasty; but only that he had, by some means or other, contrived to force all those who had ventured to contest the palm with him, to quit the field. He was large and robust in person, and his ruby visage showed that if he grew fat upon drugs, it was not by swallowing them himself. It was never exactly ascertained from what college the

The Haunted Quack

doctor had received his diploma; nor was he very forward to exhibit his credentials. When hard pressed, however, he would produce a musty old roll of parchment, with a red seal as broad as the palm of his hand, which looked as if it might have been the identical diploma of the great Boerhaave himself, and some cramp manuscript of a dozen pages, in an unknown tongue, said by the doctor to be his Greek thesis. These documents were enough to satisfy the doubts of the most skeptical. By the simple country people, far and near, the doctor was regarded, in point of occult knowledge and skill, as a second Faustus. It is true the village lawyer, a rival in popularity, used to whisper, that the doctor's Greek thesis was nothing but a bundle of prescriptions for the bots, wind-galls, spavins, and other veterinary complaints, written in High Dutch by a Hessian horse-doctor; that the diploma was all a sham, and that Ephraim was no more a doctor than his jackass. But these assertions were all put down to the score of envy on the part of the lawyer. Be this as it may, on the strength of one or two remarkable cures, which he was said to have performed, and by dint of wheedling some and bullying others, it was certain that Ramshorne had worked himself into very good practice. The doctor united in his own person the attributes of apothecary and physician; and as he vended as well as prescribed his own drugs, it was not his interest to stint his patients in their enormous boluses, or nauseous draughts. His former medical student had been worried into a consumption over the mortar and pestle; in consequence of which, he had pitched upon me for his successor.

"By the kindness of a few friends, I was fitted out with the necessary requisitions for my metamorphosis. The doctor required no fee, and, in consideration of certain little services to be rendered him, such as taking care of his horse, cleaning his boots, running errands, and doing little jobs about the house, had promised to board and lodge me, besides giving me my professional education. So, with a rusty suit of black, and an old plaid cloak, behold equipped the disciple of Esculapius.

"I cannot describe my elation of mind, when I found myself fairly installed in the doctor's office. Golden visions floated before my eyes. I fancied my fortune already made, and blessed my happy star, that I had fallen under the benign influence of so munificent a patron.

"The doctor's office, as it was called *par excellence*, was a little nook of a room, communicating with a larger apartment denominated the shop. The paraphernalia of this latter place had gotten somewhat into disorder since the last student had gone away, and I soon learnt that it was to be my task to arrange the heterogeneous mass of bottles, boxes, and gallipots, that were strowed about in promiscuous confusion. In the office, there was a greater appearance of order. A small regiment of musty-looking books were drawn up in line upon a couple of shelves, where, to judge from the superincumbent strata of dust, they appeared to have peacefully reposed for many years. A rickety wooden clock, which the doctor had taken in part payment from a pedler, and the vital functions of which, to use his own expression, had long since ceased to act, stood in one corner. A mouldy plaster bust of some unknown worthy, a few bottles of pickled, and one or two dried specimens of morbid anatomy, a small chest of drawers, a table, and a couple of chairs, completed the furniture of this *sanctum*. The single window commanded a view of the churchyard, in which, it was said, many of the doctor's former patients were quietly slumbering. With a feeling of reverence I ventured to dislodge one of the dusty tomes, and began to try to puzzle out the hard words with which it abounded; when suddenly, as if he had been conjured back, like the evil one by Cornelius Agrippa's book, the doctor made his appearance. With a gruff air, he snatched the volume from my hands, and telling me not to meddle with what I could not understand, bade me go and take care of his horse, and make haste back, as he wanted me to spread a pitch-plaster, and carry the same, with a bottle of his patent catholicon, to farmer Van Pelt, who had the rheumatism. On my return, I was ordered by Mrs. Ramshorne to split some wood, and kindle a fire in the parlor, as she expected company; after which Miss Euphemia Ramshorne, a sentimental young lady, who was as crooked in person and crabbed in temper as her own name, despatched me to the village circulating library, in quest of the *Mysteries of Udolpho*. I soon found out that my place was no sinecure. The greater part of my time was occupied in compounding certain quack medicines of Ramshorne's own invention, from which he derived great celebrity, and no inconsiderable profit. Besides his patent catholicon, and universal panacea, there was his anti-pertusso-balsamico drops, his patent calorific refrigerating anodyne, and his golden restorative of nature. Into the business of compounding these, and other articles with similar high-sounding titles, I was gradually initiated, and soon acquired so much skill in their manipulation, that my

The Haunted Quack

services became indispensable to my master; so much so, that he was obliged to hire a little negro to take care of his horse, and clean his boots. What chiefly reconciled me to the drudgery of the shop, was the seeing how well the doctor got paid for his villanous compounds. A mixture of a little brick-dust, rosin, and treacle, dignified with the title of the anthelminthic amalgam, he sold for half a dollar; and a bottle of vinegar and alum, with a little rose-water to give it a flavor, yclept the anti-scrofulous abstergent lotion, brought twice that sum. I longed for the day when I should dispense my own medicines, and in my hours of castle-building, looked forward to fortunes far beyond those of the renowned Dr. Solomon. Alas! my fond hopes have been blighted in their bud. I have drunk deeply of the nauseous draught of adversity, and been forced to swallow many bitter pills of disappointment. But I find I am beginning to smell of the shop. I must return to my sad tale. The same accident, which not unfrequently before had put a sudden stop to the doctor's patients' taking any more of his nostrums, at length prevented him from reaping any longer their golden harvest. One afternoon, after having dined with his friend Squire Gobbledown, he came home, and complained of not feeling very well. By his directions, I prepared for him some of his elixir sanitatis, composed of brandy and bitters, of which he took an inordinate dose. Shortly after, he was seized with a fit of apoplexy, and before bedtime, in spite of all the drugs in the shop, which I poured down with unsparing hand, he had breathed his last. In three days, Ramshorne was quietly deposited in the churchyard, in the midst of those he had sent there before him.

"Having resided with the doctor for several years, I had become pretty well known throughout the neighborhood, particularly among the old ladies, whose good graces I had always sedulously cultivated. I accordingly resolved to commence quacking I mean practising on my own account. Having obtained my late master's stock of drugs from his widow at an easy rate, and displaying my own name in golden letters as his successor, to work I went, with the internal resolve that where Ramshorne had given one dose, I would give six.

"For a time, Fortune seemed to smile upon me, and every thing went on well. All the old women were loud in sounding my praises, far and near. The medicaments of my master continued to be in demand, and treacle, brick-dust, and alum, came to a good market. Some drawbacks, however, I occasionally met with. Having purchased the patent right of one of Thompson's steam-baths, in my first experiment I came near flaying alive a rheumatic tanner, who had submitted himself to the operation. By an unfortunate mistake in regulating the steam, he was nearly parboiled; and it was supposed that the thickness of his hide alone preserved his vitals uninjured. I was myself threatened with the fate of Marsyas, by the enraged sufferer; which he was happily prevented from attempting to inflict, by a return of his malady, which has never since left him. I, however, after this, gave up steaming, and confined myself to regular practice. At length, either the charm of novelty wearing off, or people beginning to discover the inefficacy of the old nostrums, I was obliged to exert my wit to invent new ones. These I generally took the precaution to try upon cats or dogs, before using them upon the human system. They were, however, mostly of an innocent nature, and I satisfied my conscience with the reflection, that if they did no good, they could at least do no harm. Happy would it have been for me, could I always have done thus. Meeting with success in my first efforts, I by degrees ventured upon more active ingredients. At length, in an evil hour, I invented a curious mixture, composed of forty-nine different articles. This I dubbed, in high flowing terms, 'The Antidote to Death, or the Eternal Elixir of Longevity;' knowing full well, that though

'A rose might smell as sweet by any other name,'

yet would not my drugs find as good a sale under a more humble title. This cursed compound proved the antidote to all my hopes of success. Besides forcing me to quit the village in a confounded hurry, it has imbittered my life ever since, and reduced me to the ragged and miserable plight in which you see me.

"I dare say you have met with that species of old women, so frequent in all country towns, who, seeming to have outlived the common enjoyments of life, and outworn the ordinary sources of excitement, seek fresh stimulus in scenes of distress, and appear to take a morbid pleasure in beholding the varieties of human suffering and misery. One of the most noted characters in the village was an old beldame of this description. Granny Gordon so she was familiarly denominated was the rib of the village Vulcan, and the din of her eternal tongue was only

The Haunted Quack

equalled by the ringing of her husband's anvil. Thin and withered away in person, and redolent with snuff, she bore no small resemblance to a newly exhumed mummy, and to all appearance promised to last as long as one of those ancient dames of Egypt. Not a death, a burial, a fit of sickness, a casualty, nor any of the common calamities of life ever occurred in the vicinity, but Granny Gordon made it her especial business to be present. Wrapped in an old scarlet cloak that hideous cloak! the thought of it makes me shudder she might be seen hovering about the dwelling of the sick. Watching her opportunity, she would make her way into the patient's chamber, and disturb his repose with long, dismal stories and ill-boding predictions; and if turned from the house, which was not unfrequently the case, she would depart muttering threats and abuse.

"As the Indians propitiate the favor of the devil, so had I, in my eagerness to acquire popularity, made a firm friend and ally, though rather a troublesome one, of this old woman. She was one of my best customers, and, provided it was something new, and had a high-sounding name to recommend it, would take my most nauseous compounds with the greatest relish. Indeed the more disgusting was the dose, the greater, in her opinion, was its virtue.

"I had just corked the last bottle of my antidote, when a message came to tell me, that Granny Gordon had one of her old fits, and wanted some new doctor-stuff, as the old physic didn't do her any more good. Not having yet given my new pharmaceutic preparation a trial, I felt a little doubtful about its effects; but trusting to the toughness of the old woman's system, I ventured to send a potion, with directions to take it cautiously. Not many minutes had elapsed, before the messenger returned, in breathless haste, to say that Mrs. Gordon was much worse, and that though she had taken all the stuff, they believed she was dying. With a vague foreboding of evil, I seized my hat, and hastened to the blacksmith's. On entering the chamber, my eyes were greeted with a sad spectacle. Granny Gordon, bolstered up in the bed, holding in her hand the bottle I had sent her, drained of its contents, sat gasping for breath, and occasionally agitated by strong convulsions. A cold sweat rested on her forehead; her eyes seemed dim and glazed; her nose, which was usually of a ruby hue, was purple and peaked; and her whole appearance evidently betokened approaching dissolution.

"Around the bed were collected some half dozen withered beldames, who scowled upon me, as I entered, with ill-omened visages. Her husband, a drunken brute, who used to beat his better half six times a week, immediately began to load me with abuse, accusing me of having poisoned his dear, dear wife, and threatening to be the death of me, if she died.

"My conscience smote me. I felt stupified and bewildered, and knew not which way to turn. At this moment, the patient, perceiving me, with a hideous contortion of countenance, the expression of which I shall carry to my dying hour, and a voice between a scream and a groan, held up the empty bottle, and exclaimed, 'This is your doing, you villanous quack you;' (here she was seized with hickup;) 'you have poisoned me, you have;' (here fearful spasms shook her whole frame;) 'but I'll be revenged; day and night my ghost shall haunt ' Here her voice became inarticulate, and shaking her withered arm at me, she fell back, and to my extreme horror, gave up the ghost. This was too much for my nerves. I rushed from the house, and ran home with the dying curse ringing in my ears, fancying that I saw her hideous physiognomy, grinning from every bush and tree that I passed. Knowing that as soon as the noise of this affair should get abroad, the village would be too hot to hold me, I resolved to decamp as silently as possible. First throwing all my recently manufactured anodyne into the canal, that it should not rise in judgment against me, I made up a little bundle of clothes, and taking my seat in the mail-stage, which was passing at the time, and fortunately empty, in a couple of days I found myself in the great city of New York. Having a little money with me, I hired a mean apartment in an obscure part of the city, in the hope that I might remain concealed till all search after me should be over, when I might find some opportunity of getting employment, or of resuming my old profession, under happier auspices. By degrees the few dollars I brought with me were expended; and after pawning my watch and some of my clothes, I found myself reduced to the last shilling. But not the fear of impending starvation, nor the dread of a jail, are to be compared to the horrors I nightly suffer. Granny Gordon has been as good as her word. Every night, at the solemn hour of twelve," (here he looked fearfully around,) "her ghost appears to me, wrapped in a red cloak, with her gray hairs streaming from

The Haunted Quack

beneath an old nightcap of the same color, brandishing the vial, and accusing me of having poisoned her. These visitations have at length become so insupportable, that I have resolved to return and give myself up to justice; for I feel that hanging itself is better than this state of torment."

Here the young man ceased. I plainly saw that he was a little disordered in his intellect. To comfort him, however, I told him, that if he had killed fifty old women, they could do nothing to him, if he had done it professionally. And as for the ghost, we would take means to have that put at rest, when we reached Utica.

About the gray of the morning, we arrived at the place of our destination. My *protégé*, having unburdened his mind, seemed more at his ease, and taking a mint-julep, prepared to accompany me on shore. As we were leaving the boat, several persons in a wagon drove down to the wharf. As soon as my companion observed them, he exclaimed with a start of surprise, "Hang me! if there isn't old Graham the sheriff, with lawyer Dickson and Bill Gordon, come to take me." As he spoke, his foot slipping, he lost his balance, and fell backwards into the canal. We drew him from the water, and as soon as the persons in the wagon perceived him, they one and all sprang out, and ran up with the greatest expressions of joyful surprise. "Why, Hippy, my lad," exclaimed the sheriff, "where have you been? All our town has been in a snarl about you. We all supposed you had been forcibly abducted. Judge Bates offered a reward of twenty dollars for your corpse. We have dragged the canal for more than a mile, and found a mess of bottles, which made us think you had been spirited away. Betsy Wilkins made her affidavit, that she heard Bill Gordon swear that he would take your life, and here you see we have brought him down to have his trial. But come, come, jump in the wagon; we'll take you up to the tavern, to get your duds dried, and tell you all about it."

Here a brawny fellow, with a smutty face, who I found was Gordon the blacksmith, came up, and shaking Hippocrates by the hand, said, "By goles, doctor, I am glad to see you. If you hadn't come back, I believe it would have gone hard with me. Come, man, you must forgive the hard words I gave you. My old woman soon got well of her fit, after you went away, and says she thinks the stuff did her a mortal sight o' good."

It is impossible to describe the singular expression the countenance of the young man now exhibited. For some time he stood in mute amazement, shaking with cold, and gazing alternately at each of his friends as they addressed him; and it required their reiterated assurances to convince him, that Granny Gordon was still in the land of the living, and that he had not been haunted by a veritable ghost.

Wishing to obtain a further explanation of this strange scene, I accompanied them to the tavern. A plain-looking man, in a farmer's dress, who was of the party, confirmed what the blacksmith had said, as to the supposed death of his wife, and her subsequent recovery. "She was only in a swoond," said he, "but came to, soon after the doctor had left her." He added that it was his private opinion, that she would now last forever. He spoke of Hippocrates as a "nation smart doctor, who had a power of larning, but gave severe doses."

After discussing a good breakfast, my young friend thanked me for the sympathy and interest I had taken in his behalf. He told me he intended returning to the practice of his profession. I admonished him to be more careful in the exhibition of his patent medicines, telling him that all old women had not nine lives. He shook hands with me, and, gayly jumping into the wagon, rode off with his friends.