

A Hawthorne House Holiday

1895

'Tis the night before Solstice, and throughout Hawthorne House,

the lights twinkle fearsome and wee.

With smoke from the chimney and snow round the eaves

and candlelight under the tree,

the house looks so wholesome, the house looks so sweet,

like gingerbread frosted for children to eat.

The neighbors come crowding to see.

Carriages canter the lane to the house

and draw up against the stone stair.

Coachmen hop down and hold open doors

for the trios and singles and pairs.

To the sound of the bells and the blaze of the torch,

They crowd through the snow and they mount to the porch

while horses' breath steams in the air.

In front of the house is an old oak tree,

its darkened bark gnarled as sin,

and many a son and a daughter has swung

on ropes hanging down from its limbs.

But now in December its leaves have been shed,
and under the snow they lay drifted and dead,
but the faery lights beckon you in.

The door is bedecked with chrysanthemum blooms
with holly and ivy entwined,
A cat and a fiddle is the knocker in brass
so lifelike you think that it breathes.

Lift the knocker, hold your breath, drop it.

The story has started and nothing can stop it.

The house pulls you in like a thief.

The foyer is filled up with neighbors and noise,
and chandelier candles ablaze.

A smorgasbord cornucopia spills
a thousand delights to amaze.

Fondant and fruitcake and hot buttered rum,
Oranges and absinthe and pudding with plums,
garlands on doors and stairways.

Some guests are your neighbors, but some of them aren't.

They're taller and fairer of face.

Strangers the likes of which you've never met,

who move with a slow, eerie grace.

Ethereal, floating, handsome, aloof,
(the hem of a gown hides the scrape of a hoof),
wrapped up in muslin and lace.

They don't seem quite human, these mysterious guests,
as you watch them cavort and gavotte.

Beneath soft chestnut curls you catch glimpses of horns,
fur beneath silken cravats.

And some of their dresses flutter like wings
or rustle like feathers, and all of these things
are like a memory that you have forgot.

And some are quite tiny, like dolls come alive,
and some are mishapen and wan.

Lumpen and mottled, or smooth and unfeatured,
pale like they've not known the sun.

All of them marked by sensational wonder,
offering proof, as rain follows thunder,
of miracles in the salon.

There's dancing and dalliance in the big drawing room,
and a yuletide log brightly burning

where the glittering women and lace-embossed men
are gliding and leaping and turning.

The fiddles are bending your feet and your ear
til all you can feel at the death of the year
is a mesmeric delicate yearning.

But where have wandered to, why have you come?

How does the music enslave you?

Why do the windowpanes glitter like eyes?

Who is beside you to save you?

One of the bright crowd catches your eye,
and once you have clearly seen her
she is all you can think and all you can know.

She moves with a measured demeanor,
with more poise and purpose than others around her.
You are hopeful and certain it is fate that you've found her,
your heart focuses sharper and keener.

Silver her hair and golden her eyes,
her dress is all checkerboard squares.
Her gloves are of silk and her lips rimmed in black,
her voice like a devious prayer.

A beautiful faerie who beckons and calls you,
while you stumble heedless of what will befall you,
headlong you court the affair.

Mistletoe hangs at the top of the arch
where the silver-haired harlequin waits.
You feel a warmth and a tingle and a parting of lips,
an abandoning all to the fates.

But just as you smile, and she reaches her hand,
a voice fills the room and it quiets the band,
you both look to see what awaits.

At the head of the room stands a man all in black
the householder, master, and host.

Dark is his coat and his tall spotless hat,
his glistening skin pale as a ghost.

He shrugs and adjusts his midnight black suit,
he grabs the champagne and he pours out a flute,
and lifts his hand high in a toast.

“Neighbors and guests,” says the man, as he stands
in front of the roaring fireplace.

“Some have come far, and others live near,

but every feature and face
is welcome in my house on this hill,
so dance and eat and drink your fill.

I welcome you *all* to this place.

“My name is DeQuincey, for those I’ve not met,

by training and trade I’m a doctor.

Old Mr. Hawthorne sold me this house,

And since I moved in and unlocked her,

I knew that this house would host and amaze,

and I’d entertain with the torches ablaze,

the finest grand gatherings on offer.

“So make yourselves cozy and make yourselves snug,

eat chocolate and peppermint candy.

Talbot the butler is standing right there

looking so stately and grand, he

will do as you ask, so please, for my sake,

have him procure you a slice of spice cake,

a cigar, or a snifter of brandy.”

There is raucous applause for your most gracious host,

and the music commences anew.

The mysterious visitors once again spin

and the harlequin reaches for you.

For an hour or three there is blissful confusion,

as the party approaches its rightful conclusion,

when the dawn dips the lawn in its dew.

You dance and you dally, but you also catch glimpses

in the shadowy edges of rooms

of singular servants who scurry and flit

doing curious work in the gloom.

You find yourself straining to follow their hands

as they bend to small tasks you don't quite understand

in doorways darker than tombs.

They seem to be hammering nails into floors

or hanging up intricate knick-knacks

like crucifix statues and pictures of saints,

and pentagram figures in thick wax.

And some of the servants stand sideways and slant

and move weirdly backwards while mumbling a chant

in voices that raise to a climax.

And you wonder what it means that they do it.

You wonder the reasoning why.

You wonder why none of the other guests notice

these movings in corners of eyes.

Then all at once the dawn starts to flower

and the grandfather clock is striking the hour

and the music fades slowly and dies.

And everyone starts to move to the door,

flowing like rivers down stairwells,

putting down glasses and picking up coats,

scattering thank-yous and farewells.

But as they approach the doors to start leaving

Some of the guests stop still, disbelieving;

the faerie host seems quite unwell.

All of the regular party-guests, neighbors,

step easily into the snow.

They soon disappear into carriages waiting

they wave and they laugh as they go.

But the glittering goers, the hornéd and winged,

the harlequins, goblins, and goat-footed things,

stand stuck to their place in tableau.

Don't be mistaken, they *do* try to leave,
they strain at the windows and doorways.

They push against barriers you cannot see.

They walk widdershins, sideways, and more ways.

But the crosses and pentagrams, the iron-head nails,
prevent them from moving, and as each one fails,
they wildly search round for betrayers.

Dr. DeQuincey stands smiling and proud,
in the foyer with Talbot beside him.

He faces the fae, who are broken and lost,
and leans closer as if to confide them.

"I'm afraid your wandering days have come to a close,"
he lays his long finger aside of his nose,
and laughs as if to deride them.

"You've danced and you've stumbled full into my grasp.

My mystical traps have enslaved you.

No longer will you trouble and taunt the unwary;

no one stands by who can save you.

None of you here can my clever plans thwart,

nor stop me presenting this Unseelie Court

to the high-paying public who craves you!"

And one of those trapped is a harlequin fae

with black eyes and silvery hair.

And you know that she won't be leaving the house,

that all of her life is now there.

And she'll never have you to be caught and enraptured,

for the Man in the Black Suit has snared her and entrapped her,

casting sorcerous nets in the air.

But then you're outside, your frail human self,

you cannot hear what next ensues.

You find your own carriage, head for your own home,

your life still your own life to choose.

And the Solstice breaks bright through the snow-laden clouds

on the gingerbread face of the old Hawthorne House,

where the shadows burn dark as a bruise.