

The Marble Faun

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Chapter 11: Fragmentary Sentences

In the Borghese Grove, so recently uproarious with merriment and music, there remained only Miriam and her strange follower.

A solitude had suddenly spread itself around them. It perhaps symbolized a peculiar character in the relation of these two, insulating them, and building up an insuperable barrier between their life-streams and other currents, which might seem to flow in close vicinity. For it is one of the chief earthly incommunities of some species of misfortune, or of a great crime, that it makes the actor in the one, or the sufferer of the other, an alien in the world, by interposing a wholly unsympathetic medium betwixt himself and those whom he yearns to meet.

Owing, it may be, to this moral estrangement,—this chill remoteness of their position,—there have come to us but a few vague whisperings of what passed in Miriam's interview that afternoon with the sinister personage who had dogged her footsteps ever since the visit to the catacomb. In weaving these mystic utterances into a continuous scene, we undertake a task resembling in its perplexity that of gathering up and piecing together the fragments of a letter which has been torn and scattered to the winds. Many words of deep significance, many entire sentences, and those possibly the most important ones, have flown too far on the winged breeze to be recovered. If we insert our own conjectural amendments, we perhaps give a purport utterly at variance with the true one. Yet unless we attempt something in this way, there must remain an unsightly gap, and a lack of continuousness and dependence in our narrative; so that it would arrive at certain inevitable catastrophes without due warning of their imminence.

Of so much we are sure, that there seemed to be a sadly mysterious fascination in the influence of this ill-omened person over Miriam; it was such as beasts and reptiles of subtle and evil nature sometimes exercise upon their victims. Marvellous it was to see the hopelessness with which being naturally of so courageous a spirit she resigned herself to the thralldom in which he held her. That iron chain, of which some of the massive links were



round her feminine waist, and the others in his ruthless hand,—or which, perhaps, bound the pair together by a bond equally torturing to each,—must have been forged in some such unhallowed furnace as is only kindled by evil passions, and fed by evil deeds.

Yet, let us trust, there may have been no crime in Miriam, but only one of those fatalities which are among the most insoluble riddles propounded to mortal comprehension; the fatal decree by which every crime is made to be the agony of many innocent persons, as well as of the single guilty one.

It was, at any rate, but a feeble and despairing kind of remonstrance which she had now the energy to oppose against his persecution.

“You follow me too closely,” she said, in low, faltering accents; “you allow me too scanty room to draw my breath. Do you know what will be the end of this?”

“I know well what must be the end,” he replied.

“Tell me, then,” said Miriam, “that I may compare your foreboding with my own. Mine is a very dark one.”

“There can be but one result, and that soon,” answered the model. “You must throw off your present mask and assume another. You must vanish out of the scene: quit Rome with me, and leave no trace whereby to follow you. It is in my power, as you well know, to compel your acquiescence in my bidding. You are aware of the penalty of a refusal.”

“Not that penalty with which you would terrify me,” said Miriam; “another there may be, but not so grievous.”

“What is that other?” he inquired.

“Death! Simply death!” she answered.

“Death,” said her persecutor, “is not so simple and opportune a thing as you imagine. You are strong and warm with life. Sensitive and irritable as your spirit is, these many months of trouble, this latter thralldom in which I hold you, have scarcely made your cheek paler than I saw it in your girlhood. Miriam,—for I forbear to speak another name, at which these leaves would shiver above our heads,—Miriam, you cannot die!”

“Might not a dagger find my heart?” said she, for the first time meeting his eyes. “Would not poison make an end of me? Will not the Tiber drown me?”

“It might,” he answered; “for I allow that you are mortal. But, Miriam, believe me, it is not your fate to die while there remains so much to be sinned and suffered in the world. We have a destiny which we must needs fulfil together. I, too, have struggled to escape it. I was as anxious as yourself to break the tie between us,—to bury the past in a fathomless grave,—to make it impossible that we should ever meet, until you confront me at the bar of



Judgment! You little can imagine what steps I took to render all this secure; and what was the result? Our strange interview in the bowels of the earth convinced me of the futility of my design.”

“Ah, fatal chance!” cried Miriam, covering her face with her hands.

“Yes, your heart trembled with horror when you recognized me,” rejoined he; “but you did not guess that there was an equal horror in my own!”

“Why would not the weight of earth above our heads have crumbled down upon us both, forcing us apart, but burying us equally?” cried Miriam, in a burst of vehement passion. “O, that we could have wandered in those dismal passages till we both perished, taking opposite paths in the darkness, so that when we lay down to die, our last breaths might not mingle!”

“It were vain to wish it,” said the model. “In all that labyrinth of midnight paths, we should have found one another out to live or die together. Our fates cross and are entangled. The threads are twisted into a strong cord, which is dragging us to an evil doom. Could the knots be severed, we might escape. But neither can your slender fingers untie these knots, nor my masculine force break them. We must submit!”

“Pray for rescue, as I have,” exclaimed Miriam. “Pray for deliverance from me, since I am your evil genius, as you mine. Dark as your life has been, I have known you to pray in times past!”

At these words of Miriam, a tremor and horror appeared to seize upon her persecutor, inasmuch that he shook and grew ashy pale before her eyes. In this man’s memory there was something that made it awful for him to think of prayer; nor would any torture be more intolerable than to be reminded of such divine comfort and succor as await pious souls merely for the asking; This torment was perhaps the token of a native temperament deeply susceptible of religious impressions, but which had been wronged, violated, and debased, until, at length, it was capable only of terror from the sources that were intended for our purest and loftiest consolation. He looked so fearfully at her, and with such intense pain struggling in his eyes, that Miriam felt pity.

And now, all at once, it struck her that he might be mad. It was an idea that had never before seriously occurred to her mind, although, as soon as suggested, it fitted marvellously into many circumstances that lay within her knowledge. But, alas! such was her evil fortune, that, whether mad or no, his power over her remained the same, and was likely to be used only the more tyrannously, if exercised by a lunatic.

“I would not give you pain,” she said, soothingly; “your faith allows you the consolations of penance and absolution. Try what help there may be in these, and leave me to myself.”



“Do not think it, Miriam,” said he; “we are bound together, and can never part again.”

“Why should it seem so impossible?” she rejoined. “Think how I had escaped from all the past! I had made for myself a new sphere, and found new friends, new occupations, new hopes and enjoyments. My heart, methinks, was almost as unburdened as if there had been no miserable life behind me. The human spirit does not perish of a single wound, nor exhaust itself in a single trial of life. Let us but keep asunder, and all may go well for both.”

“We fancied ourselves forever sundered,” he replied. “Yet we met once, in the bowels of the earth; and, were we to part now, our fates would fling us together again in a desert, on a mountain-top, or in whatever spot seemed safest. You speak in vain, therefore.”

“You mistake your own will for an iron necessity,” said Miriam; “otherwise, you might have suffered me to glide past you like a ghost, when we met among those ghosts of ancient days. Even now you might bid me pass as freely.”

“Never!” said he, with unmitigable will; “your reappearance has destroyed the work of years. You know the power that I have over you. Obey my bidding; or, within a short time, it shall be exercised: nor will I cease to haunt you till the moment comes.”

“Then,” said Miriam more calmly, “I foresee the end, and have already warned you of it. It will be death!”

“Your own death, Miriam,—or mine?” he asked, looking fixedly at her.

“Do you imagine me a murderess?” said she, shuddering; “you, at least, have no right to think me so!”

“Yet,” rejoined he, with a glance of dark meaning, “men have said that this white hand had once a crimson stain.” He took her hand as he spoke, and held it in his own, in spite of the repugnance, amounting to nothing short of agony, with which she struggled to regain it. Holding it up to the fading light (for there was already dimness among the trees), he appeared to examine it closely, as if to discover the imaginary blood-stain with which he taunted her. He smiled as he let it go. “It looks very white,” said he; “but I have known hands as white, which all the water in the ocean would not have washed clean.”

“It had no stain,” retorted Miriam bitterly, “until you grasped it in your own.”

The wind has blown away whatever else they may have spoken.

They went together towards the town, and, on their way, continued to make reference, no doubt, to some strange and dreadful history of their former life, belonging equally to this dark man and to the fair and youthful woman whom he persecuted. In their words, or in the breath that uttered them, there seemed to be an odor of guilt, and a scent of blood. Yet, how can we imagine that a stain of ensanguined crime should attach to Miriam! Or



how, on the other hand, should spotless innocence be subjected to a thralldom like that which she endured from the spectre, whom she herself had evoked out of the darkness! Be this as it might, Miriam, we have reason to believe, still continued to beseech him, humbly, passionately, wildly, only to go his way, and leave her free to follow her own sad path.

Thus they strayed onward through the green wilderness of the Borghese grounds, and soon came near the city wall, where, had Miriam raised her eyes, she might have seen Hilda and the sculptor leaning on the parapet. But she walked in a mist of trouble, and could distinguish little beyond its limits. As they came within public observation, her persecutor fell behind, throwing off the imperious manner which he had assumed during their solitary interview. The Porta del Popolo swarmed with life. The merry-makers, who had spent the feast-day outside the walls, were now thronging in; a party of horsemen were entering beneath the arch; a travelling carriage had been drawn up just within the verge, and was passing through the villainous ordeal of the papal custom-house. In the broad piazza, too, there was a motley crowd.

But the stream of Miriam's trouble kept its way through this flood of human life, and neither mingled with it nor was turned aside. With a sad kind of feminine ingenuity, she found a way to kneel before her tyrant undetected, though in full sight of all the people, still beseeching him for freedom, and in vain.

