

The Marble Faun

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Chapter 16: A Moonlight Ramble

The proposal for a moonlight ramble was received with acclamation by all the younger portion of the company. They immediately set forth and descended from story to story, dimly lighting their way by waxen tapers, which are a necessary equipment to those whose thoroughfare, in the night-time, lies up and down a Roman staircase. Emerging from the courtyard of the edifice, they looked upward and saw the sky full of light, which seemed to have a delicate purple or crimson lustre, or, at least some richer tinge than the cold, white moonshine of other skies. It gleamed over the front of the opposite palace, showing the architectural ornaments of its cornice and pillared portal, as well as the iron-barred basement windows, that gave such a prison-like aspect to the structure, and the shabbiness and Squalor that lay along its base. A cobbler was just shutting up his little shop, in the basement of the palace; a cigar vender's lantern flared in the blast that came through the archway; a French sentinel paced to and fro before the portal; a homeless dog, that haunted thereabouts, barked as obstreperously at the party as if he were the domestic guardian of the precincts.

The air was quietly full of the noise of falling water, the cause of which was nowhere visible, though apparently near at hand. This pleasant, natural sound, not unlike that of a distant cascade in the forest, may be heard in many of the Roman streets and piazzas, when the tumult of the city is hushed; for consuls, emperors, and popes, the great men of every age, have found no better way of immortalizing their memories than by the shifting, indestructible, ever new, yet unchanging, upgush and downfall of water. They have written their names in that unstable element, and proved it a more durable record than brass or marble.

"Donatello, you had better take one of those gay, boyish artists for your companion," said Miriam, when she found the Italian youth at her side. "I am not now in a merry mood, as when we set all the world a-dancing the other afternoon, in the Borghese grounds."

"I never wish to dance any more," answered Donatello.



“What a melancholy was in that tone!” exclaimed Miriam. “You are getting spoilt in this dreary Rome, and will be as wise and as wretched as all the rest of mankind, unless you go back soon to your Tuscan vineyards. Well; give me your arm, then! But take care that no friskiness comes over you. We must walk evenly and heavily to-night!”

The party arranged itself according to its natural affinities or casual likings; a sculptor generally choosing a painter, and a painter a sculptor, for his companion, in preference to brethren of their own art. Kenyon would gladly have taken Hilda to himself, and have drawn her a little aside from the throng of merry wayfarers. But she kept near Miriam, and seemed, in her gentle and quiet way, to decline a separate alliance either with him or any other of her acquaintances.

So they set forth, and had gone but a little way, when the narrow street emerged into a piazza, on one side of which, glistening and dimpling in the moonlight, was the most famous fountain in Rome. Its murmur—not to say its uproar—had been in the ears of the company, ever since they came into the open air. It was the Fountain of Trevi, which draws its precious water from a source far beyond the walls, whence it flows hitherward through old subterranean aqueducts, and sparkles forth as pure as the virgin who first led Agrippa to its well-spring, by her father’s door.

“I shall sip as much of this water as the hollow of my hand will hold,” said Miriam.

“I am leaving Rome in a few days; and the tradition goes, that a parting draught at the Fountain of Trevi insures the traveller’s return, whatever obstacles and improbabilities may seem to beset him. Will you drink, Donatello?”

“Signorina, what you drink, I drink,” said the youth.

They and the rest of the party descended some steps to the water’s brim, and, after a sip or two, stood gazing at the absurd design of the fountain, where some sculptor of Bernini’s school had gone absolutely mad in marble. It was a great palace front, with niches and many bas-reliefs, out of which looked Agrippa’s legendary virgin, and several of the allegoric sisterhood; while, at the base, appeared Neptune, with his floundering steeds, and Tritons blowing their horns about him, and twenty other artificial fantasies, which the calm moonlight soothed into better taste than was native to them.

And, after all, it was as magnificent a piece of work as ever human skill contrived. At the foot of the palatial facade was strewn, with careful art and ordered irregularity, a broad and broken heap of massive rock, looking as if it might have lain there since the deluge. Over a central precipice fell the water, in a semicircular cascade; and from a hundred crevices, on all sides, snowy jets gushed up, and streams spouted out of the mouths and nostrils of stone



monsters, and fell in glistening drops; while other rivulets, that had run wild, came leaping from one rude step to another, over stones that were mossy, slimy, and green with sedge, because, in a Century of their wild play, Nature had adopted the Fountain of Trevi, with all its elaborate devices, for her own. Finally, the water, tumbling, sparkling, and dashing, with joyous haste and never-ceasing murmur, poured itself into a great marble-brimmed reservoir, and filled it with a quivering tide; on which was seen, continually, a snowy semicircle of momentary foam from the principal cascade, as well as a multitude of snow points from smaller jets. The basin occupied the whole breadth of the piazza, whence flights of steps descended to its border. A boat might float, and make voyages from one shore to another in this mimic lake.

In the daytime, there is hardly a livelier scene in Rome than the neighborhood of the Fountain of Trevi; for the piazza is then filled with the stalls of vegetable and fruit dealers, chestnut roasters, cigar venders, and other people, whose petty and wandering traffic is transacted in the open air. It is likewise thronged with idlers, lounging over the iron railing, and with Forestieri, who came hither to see the famous fountain. Here, also, are seen men with buckets, urchins with cans, and maidens (a picture as old as the patriarchal times) bearing their pitchers upon their heads. For the water of Trevi is in request, far and wide, as the most refreshing draught for feverish lips, the pleasantest to mingle with wine, and the wholesomest to drink, in its native purity, that can anywhere be found. But now, at early midnight, the piazza was a solitude; and it was a delight to behold this untamable water, sporting by itself in the moonshine, and compelling all the elaborate trivialities of art to assume a natural aspect, in accordance with its own powerful simplicity.

“What would be done with this water power,” suggested an artist, “if we had it in one of our American cities? Would they employ it to turn the machinery of a cotton mill, I wonder?”

“The good people would pull down those rampant marble deities,” said Kenyon, “and, possibly, they would give me a commission to carve the one-and-thirty (is that the number?) sister States, each pouring a silver stream from a separate can into one vast basin, which should represent the grand reservoir of national prosperity.”

“Or, if they wanted a bit of satire,” remarked an English artist, “you could set those same one-and-thirty States to cleansing the national flag of any stains that it may have incurred. The Roman washerwomen at the lavatory yonder, plying their labor in the open air, would serve admirably as models.”



“I have often intended to visit this fountain by moonlight,” said Miriam, “because it was here that the interview took place between Corinne and Lord Neville, after their separation and temporary estrangement. Pray come behind me, one of you, and let me try whether the face can be recognized in the water.”

Leaning over the stone brim of the basin, she heard footsteps stealing behind her, and knew that somebody was looking over her shoulder. The moonshine fell directly behind Miriam, illuminating the palace front and the whole scene of statues and rocks, and filling the basin, as it were, with tremulous and palpable light. Corinne, it will be remembered, knew Lord Neville by the reflection of his face in the water. In Miriam’s case, however (owing to the agitation of the water, its transparency, and the angle at which she was compelled to lean over), no reflected image appeared; nor, from the same causes, would it have been possible for the recognition between Corinne and her lover to take place. The moon, indeed, flung Miriam’s shadow at the bottom of the basin, as well as two more shadows of persons who had followed her, on either side.

“Three shadows!” exclaimed Miriam—“three separate shadows, all so black and heavy that they sink in the water! There they lie on the bottom, as if all three were drowned together. This shadow on my right is Donatello; I know him by his curls, and the turn of his head. My left-hand companion puzzles me; a shapeless mass, as indistinct as the premonition of calamity! Which of you can it be? Ah!”

She had turned round, while speaking, and saw beside her the strange creature whose attendance on her was already familiar, as a marvel and a jest; to the whole company of artists. A general burst of laughter followed the recognition; while the model leaned towards Miriam, as she shrank from him, and muttered something that was inaudible to those who witnessed the scene. By his gestures, however, they concluded that he was inviting her to bathe her hands.

“He cannot be an Italian; at least not a Roman,” observed an artist. “I never knew one of them to care about ablution. See him now! It is as if he were trying to wash off the time-stains and earthly soil of a thousand years!”

Dipping his hands into the capacious washbowl before him, the model rubbed them together with the utmost vehemence. Ever and anon, too, he peeped into the water, as if expecting to see the whole Fountain of Trevi turbid with the results of his ablution. Miriam looked at him, some little time, with an aspect of real terror, and even imitated him by leaning over to peep into the basin. Recovering herself, she took up some of the water in the



hollow of her hand, and practised an old form of exorcism by flinging it in her persecutor's face.

"In the name of all the Saints," cried she, "vanish, Demon, and let me be free of you now and forever!"

"It will not suffice," said some of the mirthful party, "unless the Fountain of Trevi gushes with holy water."

In fact, the exorcism was quite ineffectual upon the pertinacious demon, or whatever the apparition might be. Still he washed his brown, bony talons; still he peered into the vast basin, as if all the water of that great drinking-cup of Rome must needs be stained black or sanguine; and still he gesticulated to Miriam to follow his example. The spectators laughed loudly, but yet with a kind of constraint; for the creature's aspect was strangely repulsive and hideous.

Miriam felt her arm seized violently by Donatello. She looked at him, and beheld a tigerlike fury gleaming from his wild eyes.

"Bid me drown him!" whispered he, shuddering between rage and horrible disgust. "You shall hear his death gurgle in another instant!"

"Peace, peace, Donatello!" said Miriam soothingly, for this naturally gentle and sportive being seemed all aflame with animal rage. "Do him no mischief! He is mad; and we are as mad as he, if we suffer ourselves to be disquieted by his antics. Let us leave him to bathe his hands till the fountain run dry, if he find solace and pastime in it. What is it to you or me, Donatello? There, there! Be quiet, foolish boy!"

Her tone and gesture were such as she might have used in taming down the wrath of a faithful hound, that had taken upon himself to avenge some supposed affront to his mistress. She smoothed the young man's curls (for his fierce and sudden fury seemed to bristle among his hair), and touched his cheek with her soft palm, till his angry mood was a little assuaged.

"Signorina, do I look as when you first knew me?" asked he, with a heavy, tremulous sigh, as they went onward, somewhat apart from their companions. "Methinks there has been a change upon me, these many months; and more and more, these last few days. The joy is gone out of my life; all gone! all gone! Feel my hand! Is it not very hot? Ah; and my heart burns hotter still!"

"My poor Donatello, you are ill!" said Miriam, with deep sympathy and pity. "This melancholy and sickly Rome is stealing away the rich, joyous life that belongs to you. Go back, my dear friend, to your home among the hills, where (as I gather from what you have



told me) your days were filled with simple and blameless delights. Have you found aught in the world that is worth' what you there enjoyed? Tell me truly, Donatello!"

"Yes!" replied the young man.

"And what, in Heaven's name?" asked she.

"This burning pain in my heart," said Donatello; "for you are in the midst of it."

By this time, they had left the Fountain of Trevi considerably behind them. Little further allusion was made to the scene at its margin; for the party regarded Miriam's persecutor as diseased in his wits, and were hardly to be surprised by any eccentricity in his deportment.

Threading several narrow streets, they passed through the Piazza of the Holy Apostles, and soon came to Trajan's Forum. All over the surface of what once was Rome, it seems to be the effort of Time to bury up the ancient city, as if it were a corpse, and he the sexton; so that, in eighteen centuries, the soil over its grave has grown very deep, by the slow scattering of dust, and the accumulation of more modern decay upon older ruin.

This was the fate, also, of Trajan's Forum, until some papal antiquary, a few hundred years ago, began to hollow it out again, and disclosed the full height of the gigantic column wreathed round with bas-reliefs of the old emperor's warlike deeds. In the area before it stands a grove of stone, consisting of the broken and unequal shafts of a vanished temple, still keeping a majestic order, and apparently incapable of further demolition. The modern edifices of the piazza (wholly built, no doubt, out of the spoil of its old magnificence) look down into the hollow space whence these pillars rise.

One of the immense gray granite shafts lay in the piazza, on the verge of the area. It was a great, solid fact of the Past, making old Rome actually sensible to the touch and eye; and no study of history, nor force of thought, nor magic of song, could so vitally assure us that Rome once existed, as this sturdy specimen of what its rulers and people wrought.

"And see!" said Kenyon, laying his hand upon it, "there is still a polish remaining on the hard substance of the pillar; and even now, late as it is, I can feel very sensibly the warmth of the noonday sun, which did its best to heat it through. This shaft will endure forever. The polish of eighteen centuries ago, as yet but half rubbed off, and the heat of to-day's sunshine, lingering into the night, seem almost equally ephemeral in relation to it."

"There is comfort to be found in the pillar," remarked Miriam, "hard and heavy as it is. Lying here forever, as it will, it makes all human trouble appear but a momentary annoyance."

"And human happiness as evanescent too," observed Hilda, sighing; "and beautiful art hardly less so! I do not love to think that this dull stone, merely by its massiveness, will



last infinitely longer than any picture, in spite of the spiritual life that ought to give it immortality!”

“My poor little Hilda,” said Miriam, kissing her compassionately, “would you sacrifice this greatest mortal consolation, which we derive from the transitoriness of all things, from the right of saying, in every conjecture, ‘This, too, will pass away,’ would you give up this unspeakable boon, for the sake of making a picture eternal?”

Their moralizing strain was interrupted by a demonstration from the rest of the party, who, after talking and laughing together, suddenly joined their voices, and shouted at full pitch,

“Trajan! Trajan!”

“Why do you deafen us with such an uproar?” inquired Miriam.

In truth, the whole piazza had been filled with their idle vociferation; the echoes from the surrounding houses reverberating the cry of “Trajan,” on all sides; as if there was a great search for that imperial personage, and not so much as a handful of his ashes to be found.

“Why, it was a good opportunity to air our voices in this resounding piazza,” replied one of the artists. “Besides, we had really some hopes of summoning Trajan to look at his column, which, you know, he never saw in his lifetime. Here is your model (who, they say, lived and sinned before Trajan’s death) still wandering about Rome; and why not the Emperor Trajan?”

“Dead emperors have very little delight in their columns, I am afraid,” observed Kenyon. “All that rich sculpture of Trajan’s bloody warfare, twining from the base of the pillar to its capital, may be but an ugly spectacle for his ghostly eyes, if he considers that this huge, storied shaft must be laid before the judgment-seat, as a piece of the evidence of what he did in the flesh. If ever I am employed to sculpture a hero’s monument, I shall think of this, as I put in the bas-reliefs of the pedestal!”

“There are sermons in stones,” said Hilda thoughtfully, smiling at Kenyon’s morality; “and especially in the stones of Rome.”

The party moved on, but deviated a little from the straight way, in order to glance at the ponderous remains of the temple of Mars Ultor, within which a convent of nuns is now established,—a dove-cote, in the war-god’s mansion. At only a little distance, they passed the portico of a Temple of Minerva, most rich and beautiful in architecture, but woefully gnawed by time and shattered by violence, besides being buried midway in the accumulation of soil, that rises over dead Rome like a flood tide. Within this edifice of antique sanctity, a baker’s



shop was now established, with an entrance on one side; for, everywhere, the remnants of old grandeur and divinity have been made available for the meanest necessities of today.

“The baker is just drawing his loaves out of the oven,” remarked Kenyon. “Do you smell how sour they are? I should fancy that Minerva (in revenge for the desecration of her temple) had slyly poured vinegar into the batch, if I did not know that the modern Romans prefer their bread in the acetous fermentation.”

They turned into the Via Alessandria, and thus gained the rear of the Temple of Peace, and, passing beneath its great arches, pursued their way along a hedge-bordered lane. In all probability, a stately Roman street lay buried beneath that rustic-looking pathway; for they had now emerged from the close and narrow avenues of the modern city, and were treading on a soil where the seeds of antique grandeur had not yet produced the squalid crop that elsewhere sprouts from them. Grassy as the lane was, it skirted along heaps of shapeless ruin, and the bare site of the vast temple that Hadrian planned and built. It terminated on the edge of a somewhat abrupt descent, at the foot of which, with a muddy ditch between, rose, in the bright moonlight, the great curving wall and multitudinous arches of the Coliseum.

