

The Marble Faun

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Chapter 28: The Owl-Tower

“Will you not show me your tower?” said the sculptor one day to his friend.

“It is plainly enough to be seen, methinks,” answered the Count, with a kind of sulkiness that often appeared in him, as one of the little symptoms of inward trouble.

“Yes; its exterior is visible far and wide,” said Kenyon. “But such a gray, moss-grown tower as this, however valuable as an object of scenery, will certainly be quite as interesting inside as out. It cannot be less than six hundred years old; the foundations and lower story are much older than that, I should judge; and traditions probably cling to the walls within quite as plentifully as the gray and yellow lichens cluster on its face without.”

“No doubt,” replied Donatello,—“but I know little of such things, and never could comprehend the interest which some of you Forestieri take in them. A year or two ago an English signore, with a venerable white beard—they say he was a magician, too—came hither from as far off as Florence, just to see my tower.”

“Ah, I have seen him at Florence,” observed Kenyon. “He is a necromancer, as you say, and dwells in an old mansion of the Knights Templars, close by the Ponte Vecchio, with a great many ghostly books, pictures, and antiquities, to make the house gloomy, and one bright-eyed little girl, to keep it cheerful!”

“I know him only by his white beard,” said Donatello; “but he could have told you a great deal about the tower, and the sieges which it has stood, and the prisoners who have been confined in it. And he gathered up all the traditions of the Monte Beni family, and, among the rest, the sad one which I told you at the fountain the other day. He had known mighty poets, he said, in his earlier life; and the most illustrious of them would have rejoiced to preserve such a legend in immortal rhyme,—especially if he could have had some of our wine of Sunshine to help out his inspiration!”

“Any man might be a poet, as well as Byron, with such wine and such a theme,” rejoined the sculptor. “But shall we climb your tower? The thunder-storm gathering yonder among the hills will be a spectacle worth witnessing.”



“Come, then,” said the Count, adding, with a sigh, “it has a weary staircase, and dismal chambers, and it is very lonesome at the summit!”

“Like a man’s life, when he has climbed to eminence,” remarked the sculptor; “or, let us rather say, with its difficult steps, and the dark prison cells you speak of, your tower resembles the spiritual experience of many a sinful soul, which, nevertheless, may struggle upward into the pure air and light of Heaven at last!”

Donatello sighed again, and led the way up into the tower.

Mounting the broad staircase that ascended from the entrance hall, they traversed the great wilderness of a house, through some obscure passages, and came to a low, ancient doorway. It admitted them to a narrow turret stair which zigzagged upward, lighted in its progress by loopholes and iron-barred windows. Reaching the top of the first flight, the Count threw open a door of worm-eaten oak, and disclosed a chamber that occupied the whole area of the tower. It was most pitiably forlorn of aspect, with a brick-paved floor, bare holes through the massive walls, grated with iron, instead of windows, and for furniture an old stool, which increased the dreariness of the place tenfold, by suggesting an idea of its having once been tenanted.

“This was a prisoner’s cell in the old days,” said Donatello; “the white-bearded necromancer, of whom I told you, found out that a certain famous monk was confined here, about five hundred years ago. He was a very holy man, and was afterwards burned at the stake in the Grand-ducal Square at Firenze. There have always been stories, Tomaso says, of a hooded monk creeping up and down these stairs, or standing in the doorway of this chamber. It must needs be the ghost of the ancient prisoner. Do you believe in ghosts?”

“I can hardly tell,” replied Kenyon; “on the whole, I think not.”

“Neither do I,” responded the Count; “for, if spirits ever come back, I should surely have met one within these two months past. Ghosts never rise! So much I know, and am glad to know it!”

Following the narrow staircase still higher, they came to another room of similar size and equally forlorn, but inhabited by two personages of a race which from time immemorial have held proprietorship and occupancy in ruined towers. These were a pair of owls, who, being doubtless acquainted with Donatello, showed little sign of alarm at the entrance of visitors. They gave a dismal croak or two, and hopped aside into the darkest corner, since it was not yet their hour to flap duskily abroad.



“They do not desert me, like my other feathered acquaintances,” observed the young Count, with a sad smile, alluding to the scene which Kenyon had witnessed at the fountain-side. “When I was a wild, playful boy, the owls did not love me half so well.”

He made no further pause here, but led his friend up another flight of steps—while, at every stage, the windows and narrow loopholes afforded Kenyon more extensive eye-shots over hill and valley, and allowed him to taste the cool purity of mid-atmosphere. At length they reached the topmost chamber, directly beneath the roof of the tower.

“This is my own abode,” said Donatello; “my own owl’s nest.”

In fact, the room was fitted up as a bedchamber, though in a style of the utmost simplicity. It likewise served as an oratory; there being a crucifix in one corner, and a multitude of holy emblems, such as Catholics judge it necessary to help their devotion withal. Several ugly little prints, representing the sufferings of the Saviour, and the martyrdoms of saints, hung on the wall; and behind the crucifix there was a good copy of Titian’s Magdalen of the Pitti Palace, clad only in the flow of her golden ringlets. She had a confident look (but it was Titian’s fault, not the penitent woman’s), as if expecting to win heaven by the free display of her earthly charms. Inside of a glass case appeared an image of the sacred Bambino, in the guise of a little waxen boy, very prettily made, reclining among flowers, like a Cupid, and holding up a heart that resembled a bit of red sealing-wax. A small vase of precious marble was full of holy water.

Beneath the crucifix, on a table, lay a human skull, which looked as if it might have been dug up out of some old grave. But, examining it more closely, Kenyon saw that it was carved in gray alabaster; most skillfully done to the death, with accurate imitation of the teeth, the sutures, the empty eye-caverns, and the fragile little bones of the nose. This hideous emblem rested on a cushion of white marble, so nicely wrought that you seemed to see the impression of the heavy skull in a silken and downy substance.

Donatello dipped his fingers into the holy-water vase, and crossed himself. After doing so he trembled.

“I have no right to make the sacred symbol on a sinful breast!” he said.

“On what mortal breast can it be made, then?” asked the sculptor. “Is there one that hides no sin?”

“But these blessed emblems make you smile, I fear,” resumed the Count, looking askance at his friend. “You heretics, I know, attempt to pray without even a crucifix to kneel at.”

“I, at least, whom you call a heretic, reverence that holy symbol,” answered Kenyon. “What I am most inclined to murmur at is this death’s head. I could laugh, moreover, in



its ugly face! It is absurdly monstrous, my dear friend, thus to fling the dead weight of our mortality upon our immortal hopes. While we live on earth, 't is true, we must needs carry our skeletons about with us; but, for Heaven's sake, do not let us burden our spirits with them, in our feeble efforts to soar upward! Believe me, it will change the whole aspect of death, if you can once disconnect it, in your idea, with that corruption from which it disengages our higher part."

"I do not well understand you," said Donatello; and he took up the alabaster skull, shuddering, and evidently feeling it a kind of penance to touch it. "I only know that this skull has been in my family for centuries. Old Tomaso has a story that it was copied by a famous sculptor from the skull of that same unhappy knight who loved the fountain lady, and lost her by a blood-stain. He lived and died with a deep sense of sin upon him, and on his death-bed he ordained that this token of him should go down to his posterity. And my forefathers, being a cheerful race of men in their natural disposition, found it needful to have the skull often before their eyes, because they dearly loved life and its enjoyments, and hated the very thought of death."

"I am afraid," said Kenyon, "they liked it none the better, for seeing its face under this abominable mask."

Without further discussion, the Count led the way up one more flight of stairs, at the end of which they emerged upon the summit of the tower. The sculptor felt as if his being were suddenly magnified a hundredfold; so wide was the Umbrian valley that suddenly opened before him, set in its grand framework of nearer and more distant hills. It seemed as if all Italy lay under his eyes in that one picture. For there was the broad, sunny smile of God, which we fancy to be spread over that favored land more abundantly than on other regions, and beneath it glowed a most rich and varied fertility. The trim vineyards were there, and the fig-trees, and the mulberries, and the smoky-hued tracts of the olive orchards; there, too, were fields of every kind of grain, among which, waved the Indian corn, putting Kenyon in mind of the fondly remembered acres of his father's homestead. White villas, gray convents, church spires, villages, towns, each with its battlemented walls and towered gateway, were scattered upon this spacious map; a river gleamed across it; and lakes opened their blue eyes in its face, reflecting heaven, lest mortals should forget that better land when they beheld the earth so beautiful.

What made the valley look still wider was the two or three varieties of weather that were visible on its surface, all at the same instant of time. Here lay the quiet sunshine; there fell the great black patches of ominous shadow from the clouds; and behind them, like a giant



of league-long strides, came hurrying the thunderstorm, which had already swept midway across the plain. In the rear of the approaching tempest, brightened forth again the sunny splendor, which its progress had darkened with so terrible a frown.

All round this majestic landscape, the bald-peaked or forest-crowned mountains descended boldly upon the plain. On many of their spurs and midway declivities, and even on their summits, stood cities, some of them famous of old; for these had been the seats and nurseries of early art, where the flower of beauty sprang out of a rocky soil, and in a high, keen atmosphere, when the richest and most sheltered gardens failed to nourish it.

“Thank God for letting me again behold this scene!” Said the sculptor, a devout man in his way, reverently taking off his hat. “I have viewed it from many points, and never without as full a sensation of gratitude as my heart seems capable of feeling. How it strengthens the poor human spirit in its reliance on His providence, to ascend but this little way above the common level, and so attain a somewhat wider glimpse of His dealings with mankind! He doeth all things right! His will be done!”

“You discern something that is hidden from me,” observed Donatello gloomily, yet striving with unwonted grasp to catch the analogies which so cheered his friend. “I see sunshine on one spot, and cloud in another, and no reason for it in either ease. The sun on you; the cloud on me! What comfort can I draw from this?”

“Nay; I cannot preach,” said Kenyon, “with a page of heaven and a page of earth spread wide open before us! Only begin to read it, and you will find it interpreting itself without the aid of words. It is a great mistake to try to put our best thoughts into human language. When we ascend into the higher regions of emotion and spiritual enjoyment, they are only expressible by such grand hieroglyphics as these around us.”

They stood awhile, contemplating the scene; but, as inevitably happens after a spiritual flight, it was not long before the sculptor felt his wings flagging in the rarity of the upper atmosphere. He was glad to let himself quietly downward out of the mid-sky, as it were, and alight on the solid platform of the battlemented tower. He looked about him, and beheld growing out of the stone pavement, which formed the roof, a little shrub, with green and glossy leaves. It was the only green thing there; and Heaven knows how its seeds had ever been planted, at that airy height, or how it had found nourishment for its small life in the chinks of the stones; for it had no earth, and nothing more like soil than the crumbling mortar, which had been crammed into the crevices in a long-past age.



Yet the plant seemed fond of its native site; and Donatello said it had always grown there from his earliest remembrance, and never, he believed, any smaller or any larger than they saw it now.

“I wonder if the shrub teaches you any good lesson,” said he, observing the interest with which Kenyon examined it. “If the wide valley has a great meaning, the plant ought to have at least a little one; and it has been growing on our tower long enough to have learned how to speak it.”

“O, certainly!” answered the sculptor; “the shrub has its moral, or it would have perished long ago. And, no doubt, it is for your use and edification, since you have had it before your eyes all your lifetime, and now are moved to ask what may be its lesson.”

“It teaches me nothing,” said the simple Donatello, stooping over the plant, and perplexing himself with a minute scrutiny. “But here was a worm that would have killed it; an ugly creature, which I will fling over the battlements.”

