

The Marble Faun

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Chapter 32: Scenes by the Way

When it came to the point of quitting the reposeful life of Monte Beni, the sculptor was not without regrets, and would willingly have dreamed a little longer of the sweet paradise on earth that Hilda's presence there might make. Nevertheless, amid all its repose, he had begun to be sensible of a restless melancholy, to which the cultivators of the ideal arts are more liable than sturdier men. On his own part, therefore, and leaving Donatello out of the case, he would have judged it well to go. He made parting visits to the legendary dell, and to other delightful spots with which he had grown familiar; he climbed the tower again, and saw a sunset and a moonrise over the great valley; he drank, on the eve of his departure, one flask, and then another, of the Monte Beni Sunshine, and stored up its flavor in his memory as the standard of what is exquisite in wine. These things accomplished, Kenyon was ready for the journey.

Donatello had not very easily been stirred out of the peculiar sluggishness, which entralls and bewitches melancholy people. He had offered merely a passive resistance, however, not an active one, to his friend's schemes; and when the appointed hour came, he yielded to the impulse which Kenyon failed not to apply; and was started upon the journey before he had made up his mind to undertake it. They wandered forth at large, like two knights-errant, among the valleys, and the mountains, and the old mountain towns of that picturesque and lovely region. Save to keep the appointment with Miriam, a fortnight thereafter, in the great square of Perugia, there was nothing more definite in the sculptor's plan than that they should let themselves be blown hither and thither like Winged seeds, that mount upon each wandering breeze. Yet there was an idea of fatality implied in the simile of the winged seeds which did not altogether suit Kenyon's fancy; for, if you look closely into the matter, it will be seen that whatever appears most vagrant, and utterly purposeless, turns out, in the end, to have been impelled the most surely on a preordained and unswerving track. Chance and change love to deal with men's settled plans, not with their idle vagaries. If we desire unexpected and unimaginable events, we should contrive an iron framework, such as we



fancy may compel the future to take one inevitable shape; then comes in the unexpected, and shatters our design in fragments.

The travellers set forth on horseback, and purposed to perform much of their aimless journeyings under the moon, and in the cool of the morning or evening twilight; the midday sun, while summer had hardly begun to trail its departing skirts over Tuscany, being still too fervid to allow of noontide exposure.

For a while, they wandered in that same broad valley which Kenyon had viewed with such delight from the Monte Beni tower. The sculptor soon began to enjoy the idle activity of their new life, which the lapse of a day or two sufficed to establish as a kind of system; it is so natural for mankind to be nomadic, that a very little taste of that primitive mode of existence subverts the settled habits of many preceding years. Kenyon's cares, and whatever gloomy ideas before possessed him, seemed to be left at Monte Beni, and were scarcely remembered by the time that its gray tower grew undistinguishable on the brown hillside. His perceptive faculties, which had found little exercise of late, amid so thoughtful a way of life, became keen, and kept his eyes busy with a hundred agreeable scenes.

He delighted in the picturesque bits of rustic character and manners, so little of which ever comes upon the surface of our life at home. There, for example, were the old women, tending pigs or sheep by the wayside. As they followed the vagrant steps of their charge, these venerable ladies kept spinning yarn with that elsewhere forgotten contrivance, the distaff; and so wrinkled and stern looking were they, that you might have taken them for the Parcae, spinning the threads of human destiny. In contrast with their great-grandmothers were the children, leading goats of shaggy beard, tied by the horns, and letting them browse on branch and shrub. It is the fashion of Italy to add the petty industry of age and childhood to the hum of human toil. To the eyes of an observer from the Western world, it was a strange spectacle to see sturdy, sunburnt creatures, in petticoats, but otherwise manlike, toiling side by side with male laborers, in the rudest work of the fields. These sturdy women (if as such we must recognize them) wore the high-crowned, broad brimmed hat of Tuscan straw, the customary female head-apparel; and, as every breeze blew back its breadth of brim, the sunshine constantly added depth to the brown glow of their cheeks. The elder sisterhood, however, set off their witch-like ugliness to the worst advantage with black felt hats, bequeathed them, one would fancy, by their long-buried husbands.

Another ordinary sight, as sylvan as the above and more agreeable, was a girl, bearing on her back a huge bundle of green twigs and shrubs, or grass, intermixed with scarlet poppies and blue flowers; the verdant burden being sometimes of such size as to hide the bearer's



figure, and seem a self-moving mass of fragrant bloom and verdure. Oftener, however, the bundle reached only halfway down the back of the rustic nymph, leaving in sight her well-developed lower limbs, and the crooked knife, hanging behind her, with which she had been reaping this strange harvest sheaf. A pre-Raphaelite artist (he, for instance, who painted so marvellously a wind-swept heap of autumnal leaves) might find an admirable subject in one of these Tuscan girls, stepping with a free, erect, and graceful carriage. The miscellaneous herbage and tangled twigs and blossoms of her bundle, crowning her head (while her ruddy, comely face looks out between the hanging side festoons like a larger flower), would give the painter boundless scope for the minute delineation which he loves.

Though mixed up with what was rude and earthlike, there was still a remote, dreamlike, Arcadian charm, which is scarcely to be found in the daily toil of other lands. Among the pleasant features of the wayside were always the vines, clambering on fig-trees, or other sturdy trunks; they wreathed themselves in huge and rich festoons from one tree to another, suspending clusters of ripening grapes in the interval between. Under such careless mode of culture, the luxuriant vine is a lovelier spectacle than where it produces a more precious liquor, and is therefore more artificially restrained and trimmed. Nothing can be more picturesque than an old grapevine, with almost a trunk of its own, clinging fast around its supporting tree. Nor does the picture lack its moral. You might twist it to more than one grave purpose, as you saw how the knotted, serpentine growth imprisoned within its strong embrace the friend that had supported its tender infancy; and how (as seemingly flexible natures are prone to do) it converted the sturdier tree entirely to its own selfish ends, extending its innumerable arms on every bough, and permitting hardly a leaf to sprout except its own. It occurred to Kenyon, that the enemies of the vine, in his native land, might here have seen an emblem of the remorseless gripe, which the habit of vinous enjoyment lays upon its victim, possessing him wholly, and letting him live no life but such as it bestows.

The scene was not less characteristic when their path led the two wanderers through some small, ancient town. There, besides the peculiarities of present life, they saw tokens of the life that had long ago been lived and flung aside. The little town, such as we see in our mind's eye, would have its gate and its surrounding walls, so ancient and massive that ages had not sufficed to crumble them away; but in the lofty upper portion of the gateway, still standing over the empty arch, where there was no longer a gate to shut, there would be a dove-cote, and peaceful doves for the only warders. Pumpkins lay ripening in the open chambers of the structure. Then, as for the town wall, on the outside an orchard extends peacefully along its base, full, not of apple-trees, but of those old humorists with gnarled trunks and



twisted boughs, the olives. Houses have been built upon the ramparts, or burrowed out of their ponderous foundation. Even the gray, martial towers, crowned with ruined turrets, have been converted into rustic habitations, from the windows of which hang ears of Indian corn. At a door, that has been broken through the massive stonework where it was meant to be strongest, some contadini are winnowing grain. Small windows, too, are pierced through the whole line of ancient wall, so that it seems a row of dwellings with one continuous front, built in a strange style of needless strength; but remnants of the old battlements and machicolations are interspersed with the homely chambers and earthen-tiled housetops; and all along its extent both grapevines and running flower-shrubs are encouraged to clamber and sport over the roughness of its decay.

Finally the long grass, intermixed with weeds and wild flowers, waves on the uppermost height of the shattered rampart; and it is exceedingly pleasant in the golden sunshine of the afternoon to behold the warlike precinct so friendly in its old days, and so overgrown with rural peace. In its guard rooms, its prison chambers, and scooped out of its ponderous breadth, there are dwellings nowadays where happy human lives are spent. Human parents and broods of children nestle in them, even as the swallows nestle in the little crevices along the broken summit of the wall.

Passing through the gateway of this same little town, challenged only by those watchful sentinels, the pigeons, we find ourselves in a long, narrow street, paved from side to side with flagstones, in the old Roman fashion. Nothing can exceed the grim ugliness of the houses, most of which are three or four stories high, stone built, gray, dilapidated, or half-covered with plaster in patches, and contiguous all along from end to end of the town. Nature, in the shape of tree, shrub, or grassy sidewalk, is as much shut out from the one street of the rustic village as from the heart of any swarming city. The dark and half ruinous habitations, with their small windows, many of which are drearily closed with wooden shutters, are but magnified hovels, piled story upon story, and squalid with the grime that successive ages have left behind them. It would be a hideous scene to contemplate in a rainy day, or when no human life pervaded it. In the summer noon, however, it possesses vivacity enough to keep itself cheerful; for all the within-doors of the village then bubbles over upon the flagstones, or looks out from the small windows, and from here and there a balcony. Some of the populace are at the butcher's shop; others are at the fountain, which gushes into a marble basin that resembles an antique sarcophagus. A tailor is sewing before his door with a young priest seated sociably beside him; a burly friar goes by with an empty wine-barrel on his head; children are at play; women, at their own doorsteps, mend clothes, embroider, weave



hats of Tuscan straw, or twirl the distaff. Many idlers, meanwhile, strolling from one group to another, let the warm day slide by in the sweet, interminable task of doing nothing.

From all these people there comes a babblement that seems quite disproportioned to the number of tongues that make it. So many words are not uttered in a New England village throughout the year—except it be at a political canvass or town-meeting—as are spoken here, with no especial purpose, in a single day. Neither so many words, nor so much laughter; for people talk about nothing as if they were terribly in earnest, and make merry at nothing as if it were the best of all possible jokes. In so long a time as they have existed, and within such narrow precincts, these little walled towns are brought into a closeness of society that makes them but a larger household. All the inhabitants are akin to each, and each to all; they assemble in the street as their common saloon, and thus live and die in a familiarity of intercourse, such as never can be known where a village is open at either end, and all roundabout, and has ample room within itself.

Stuck up beside the door of one house, in this village street, is a withered bough; and on a stone seat, just under the shadow of the bough, sits a party of jolly drinkers, making proof of the new wine, or quaffing the old, as their often-tried and comfortable friend. Kenyon draws bridle here (for the bough, or bush, is a symbol of the wine-shop at this day in Italy, as it was three hundred years ago in England), and calls for a goblet of the deep, mild, purple juice, well diluted with water from the fountain. The Sunshine of Monte Beni would be welcome now. Meanwhile, Donatello has ridden onward, but alights where a shrine, with a burning lamp before it, is built into the wall of an inn stable. He kneels and crosses himself, and mutters a brief prayer, without attracting notice from the passers-by, many of whom are parenthetically devout in a similar fashion. By this time the sculptor has drunk off his wine-and-water, and our two travellers resume their way, emerging from the opposite gate of the village.

Before them, again, lies the broad valley, with a mist so thinly scattered over it as to be perceptible only in the distance, and most so in the nooks of the hills. Now that we have called it mist, it seems a mistake not rather to have called it sunshine; the glory of so much light being mingled with so little gloom, in the airy material of that vapor. Be it mist or sunshine, it adds a touch of ideal beauty to the scene, almost persuading the spectator that this valley and those hills are visionary, because their visible atmosphere is so like the substance of a dream.

Immediately about them, however, there were abundant tokens that the country was not really the paradise it looked to be, at a casual glance. Neither the wretched cottages nor



the dreary farmhouses seemed to partake of the prosperity, with which so kindly a climate, and so fertile a portion of Mother Earth's bosom, should have filled them, one and all. But possibly the peasant inhabitants do not exist in so grimy a poverty, and in homes so comfortless, as a stranger, with his native ideas of those matters, would be likely to imagine. The Italians appear to possess none of that emulative pride which we see in our New England villages, where every householder, according to his taste and means, endeavors to make his homestead an ornament to the grassy and elm-shadowed wayside. In Italy there are no neat doorsteps and thresholds; no pleasant, vine-sheltered porches; none of those grass-plots or smoothly shorn lawns, which hospitably invite the imagination into the sweet domestic interiors of English life. Everything, however sunny and luxuriant may be the scene around, is especially disheartening in the immediate neighborhood of an Italian home.

An artist, it is true, might often thank his stars for those old houses, so picturesquely time-stained, and with the plaster falling in blotches from the ancient brick-work. The prison-like, iron-barred windows, and the wide arched, dismal entrance, admitting on one hand to the stable, on the other to the kitchen, might impress him as far better worth his pencil than the newly painted pine boxes, in which—if he be an American—his countrymen live and thrive. But there is reason to suspect that a people are waning to decay and ruin the moment that their life becomes fascinating either in the poet's imagination or the painter's eye.

As usual on Italian waysides, the wanderers passed great, black crosses, hung with all the instruments of the sacred agony and passion: there were the crown of thorns, the hammer and nails, the pincers, the spear, the sponge; and perched over the whole, the cock that crowed to St. Peter's remorseful conscience. Thus, while the fertile scene showed the never-failing beneficence of the Creator towards man in his transitory state, these symbols reminded each wayfarer of the Saviour's infinitely greater love for him as an immortal spirit. Beholding these consecrated stations, the idea seemed to strike Donatello of converting the otherwise aimless journey into a penitential pilgrimage. At each of them he alighted to kneel and kiss the cross, and humbly press his forehead against its foot; and this so invariably, that the sculptor soon learned to draw bridle of his own accord. It may be, too, heretic as he was, that Kenyon likewise put up a prayer, rendered more fervent by the symbols before his eyes, for the peace of his friend's conscience and the pardon of the sin that so oppressed him.

Not only at the crosses did Donatello kneel, but at each of the many shrines, where the Blessed Virgin in fresco—faded with sunshine and half washed out with showers—looked benignly at her worshipper; or where she was represented in a wooden image, or a bas-relief of plaster or marble, as accorded with the means of the devout person who built, or restored



from a mediaeval antiquity, these places of wayside worship. They were everywhere: under arched niches, or in little penthouses with a brick tiled roof just large enough to shelter them; or perhaps in some bit of old Roman masonry, the founders of which had died before the Advent; or in the wall of a country inn or farmhouse; or at the midway point of a bridge; or in the shallow cavity of a natural rock; or high upward in the deep cuts of the road. It appeared to the sculptor that Donatello prayed the more earnestly and the more hopefully at these shrines, because the mild face of the Madonna promised him to intercede as a tender mother betwixt the poor culprit and the awfulness of judgment.

It was beautiful to observe, indeed, how tender was the soul of man and woman towards the Virgin mother, in recognition of the tenderness which, as their faith taught them, she immortally cherishes towards all human souls. In the wire-work screen before each shrine hung offerings of roses, or whatever flower was sweetest and most seasonable; some already wilted and withered, some fresh with that very morning's dewdrops. Flowers there were, too, that, being artificial, never bloomed on earth, nor would ever fade. The thought occurred to Kenyon, that flower-pots with living plants might be set within the niches, or even that rose-trees, and all kinds of flowering shrubs, might be reared under the shrines, and taught to twine and wreath themselves around; so that the Virgin should dwell within a bower of verdure, bloom, and fragrant freshness, symbolizing a homage perpetually new. There are many things in the religious customs of these people that seem good; many things, at least, that might be both good and beautiful, if the soul of goodness and the sense of beauty were as much alive in the Italians now as they must have been when those customs were first imagined and adopted. But, instead of blossoms on the shrub, or freshly gathered, with the dewdrops on their leaves, their worship, nowadays, is best symbolized by the artificial flower.

The sculptor fancied, moreover (but perhaps it was his heresy that suggested the idea), that it would be of happy influence to place a comfortable and shady seat beneath every wayside shrine. Then the weary and sun-scorched traveller, while resting himself under her protecting shadow, might thank the Virgin for her hospitality. Nor, perchance, were he to regale himself, even in such a consecrated spot, with the fragrance of a pipe, would it rise to heaven more offensively than the smoke of priestly incense. We do ourselves wrong, and too meanly estimate the Holiness above us, when we deem that any act or enjoyment, good in itself, is not good to do religiously.

Whatever may be the iniquities of the papal system, it was a wise and lovely sentiment that set up the frequent shrine and cross along the roadside. No wayfarer, bent on whatever



worldly errand, can fail to be reminded, at every mile or two, that this is not the business which most concerns him. The pleasure-seeker is silently admonished to look heavenward for a joy infinitely greater than he now possesses. The wretch in temptation beholds the cross, and is warned that, if he yield, the Saviour's agony for his sake will have been endured in vain. The stubborn criminal, whose heart has long been like a stone, feels it throb anew with dread and hope; and our poor Donatello, as he went kneeling from shrine to cross, and from cross to shrine, doubtless found an efficacy in these symbols that helped him towards a higher penitence.

Whether the young Count of Monte Beni noticed the fact, or no, there was more than one incident of their journey that led Kenyon to believe that they were attended, or closely followed, or preceded, near at hand, by some one who took an interest in their motions. As it were, the step, the sweeping garment, the faintly heard breath, of an invisible companion, was beside them, as they went on their way. It was like a dream that had strayed out of their slumber, and was haunting them in the daytime, when its shadowy substance could have neither density nor outline, in the too obtrusive light. After sunset, it grew a little more distinct.

“On the left of that last shrine,” asked the sculptor, as they rode, under the moon, “did you observe the figure of a woman kneeling, with her face hidden in her hands?”

“I never looked that way,” replied Donatello. “I was saying my own prayer. It was some penitent, perchance. May the Blessed Virgin be the more gracious to the poor soul, because she is a woman.”

