

The Marble Faun

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Chapter 41: Snow-Drops and Maidenly Delights

It being still considerably earlier than the period at which artists and tourists are accustomed to assemble in Rome, the sculptor and Hilda found themselves comparatively alone there. The dense mass of native Roman life, in the midst of which they were, served to press them near one another. It was as if they had been thrown together on a desert island. Or they seemed to have wandered, by some strange chance, out of the common world, and encountered each other in a depopulated city, where there were streets of lonely palaces, and unreckonable treasures of beautiful and admirable things, of which they two became the sole inheritors.

In such circumstances, Hilda's gentle reserve must have been stronger than her kindly disposition permitted, if the friendship between Kenyon and herself had not grown as warm as a maiden's friendship can ever be, without absolutely and avowedly blooming into love. On the sculptor's side, the amaranthine flower was already in full blow. But it is very beautiful, though the lover's heart may grow chill at the perception, to see how the snow will sometimes linger in a virgin's breast, even after the spring is well advanced. In such alpine soils, the summer will not be anticipated; we seek vainly for passionate flowers, and blossoms of fervid hue and spicy fragrance, finding only snowdrops and sunless violets, when it is almost the full season for the crimson rose.

With so much tenderness as Hilda had in her nature, it was strange that she so reluctantly admitted the idea of love; especially as, in the sculptor, she found both congeniality and variety of taste, and likenesses and differences of character; these being as essential as those to any poignancy of mutual emotion.

So Hilda, as far as Kenyon could discern, still did not love him, though she admitted him within the quiet circle of her affections as a dear friend and trusty counsellor. If we knew what is best for us, or could be content with what is reasonably good, the sculptor might well have been satisfied, for a season, with this calm intimacy, which so sweetly kept him a stranger in her heart, and a ceremonious guest; and yet allowed him the free enjoyment of all



but its deeper recesses. The flowers that grow outside of those minor sanctities have a wild, hasty charm, which it is well to prove; there may be sweeter ones within the sacred precinct, but none that will die while you are handling them, and bequeath you a delicious legacy, as these do, in the perception of their evanescence and unreality.

And this may be the reason, after all, why Hilda, like so many other maidens, lingered on the hither side of passion; her finer instinct and keener sensibility made her enjoy those pale delights in a degree of which men are incapable. She hesitated to grasp a richer happiness, as possessing already such measure of it as her heart could hold, and of a quality most agreeable to her virgin tastes.

Certainly, they both were very happy. Kenyon's genius, unconsciously wrought upon by Hilda's influence, took a more delicate character than heretofore. He modelled, among other things, a beautiful little statue of maidenhood gathering a snowdrop. It was never put into marble, however, because the sculptor soon recognized it as one of those fragile creations which are true only to the moment that produces them, and are wronged if we try to imprison their airy excellence in a permanent material.

On her part, Hilda returned to her customary Occupations with a fresh love for them, and yet with a deeper look into the heart of things; such as those necessarily acquire who have passed from picture galleries into dungeon gloom, and thence come back to the picture gallery again. It is questionable whether she was ever so perfect a copyist thenceforth. She could not yield herself up to the painter so unreservedly as in times past; her character had developed a sturdier quality, which made her less pliable to the influence of other minds. She saw into the picture as profoundly as ever, and perhaps more so, but not with the devout sympathy that had formerly given her entire possession of the old master's idea. She had known such a reality, that it taught her to distinguish inevitably the large portion that is unreal, in every work of art. Instructed by sorrow, she felt that there is something beyond almost all which pictorial genius has produced; and she never forgot those sad wanderings from gallery to gallery, and from church to church, where she had vainly sought a type of the Virgin Mother, or the Saviour, or saint, or martyr, which a soul in extreme need might recognize as the adequate one.

How, indeed, should she have found such? How could holiness be revealed to the artist of an age when the greatest of them put genius and imagination in the place of spiritual insight, and when, from the pope downward, all Christendom was corrupt?

Meanwhile, months wore away, and Rome received back that large portion of its life-blood which runs in the veins of its foreign and temporary population. English visitors



established themselves in the hotels, and in all the sunny suites of apartments, in the streets convenient to the Piazza di Spagna; the English tongue was heard familiarly along the Corso, and English children sported in the Pincian Gardens.

The native Romans, on the other hand, like the butterflies and grasshoppers, resigned themselves to the short, sharp misery which winter brings to a people whose arrangements are made almost exclusively with a view to summer. Keeping no fire within-doors, except possibly a spark or two in the kitchen, they crept out of their cheerless houses into the narrow, sunless, sepulchral streets, bringing their firesides along with them, in the shape of little earthen pots, vases, or pipkins, full of lighted charcoal and warm ashes, over which they held their tingling finger-ends. Even in this half-torpid wretchedness, they still seemed to dread a pestilence in the sunshine, and kept on the shady side of the piazzas, as scrupulously as in summer. Through the open doorways w no need to shut them when the weather within was bleaker than without—a glimpse into the interior of their dwellings showed the uncarpeted brick floors, as dismal as the pavement of a tomb.

They drew their old cloaks about them, nevertheless, and threw the corners over their shoulders, with the dignity of attitude and action that have come down to these modern citizens, as their sole inheritance from the togated nation. Somehow or other, they managed to keep up their poor, frost-bitten hearts against the pitiless atmosphere with a quiet and uncomplaining endurance that really seems the most respectable point in the present Roman character. For in New England, or in Russia, or scarcely in a hut of the Esquimaux, there is no such discomfort to be borne as by Romans in wintry weather, when the orange-trees bear icy fruit in the gardens; and when the rims of all the fountains are shaggy with icicles, and the Fountain of Trevi skimmed almost across with a glassy surface; and when there is a slide in the piazza of St. Peter's, and a fringe of brown, frozen foam along the eastern shore of the Tiber, and sometimes a fall of great snowflakes into the dreary lanes and alleys of the miserable city. Cold blasts, that bring death with them, now blow upon the shivering invalids, who came hither in the hope of breathing balmy airs.

Wherever we pass our summers, may all our inclement months, from November to April, henceforth be spent in some country that recognizes winter as an integral portion of its year!

Now, too, there was especial discomfort in the stately picture galleries, where nobody, indeed,—not the princely or priestly founders, nor any who have inherited their cheerless magnificence,—ever dreamed of such an impossibility as fireside warmth, since those great palaces were built. Hilda, therefore, finding her fingers so much benumbed that the spiritual



influence could not be transmitted to them, was persuaded to leave her easel before a picture, on one of these wintry days, and pay a visit to Kenyon's studio. But neither was the studio anything better than a dismal den, with its marble shapes shivering around the walls, cold as the snow images which the sculptor used to model in his boyhood, and sadly behold them weep themselves away at the first thaw.

Kenyon's Roman artisans, all this while, had been at work on the Cleopatra. The fierce Egyptian queen had now struggled almost out of the imprisoning stone; or, rather, the workmen had found her within the mass of marble, imprisoned there by magic, but still fervid to the touch with fiery life, the fossil woman of an age that produced statelier, stronger, and more passionate creatures than our own. You already felt her compressed heat, and were aware of a tiger-like character even in her repose. If Octavius should make his appearance, though the marble still held her within its embrace, it was evident that she would tear herself forth in a twinkling, either to spring enraged at his throat, or, sinking into his arms, to make one more proof of her rich blandishments, or, falling lowly at his feet, to try the efficacy of a woman's tears.

"I am ashamed to tell you how much I admire this statue," said Hilda. "No other sculptor could have done it."

"This is very sweet for me to hear," replied Kenyon; "and since your reserve keeps you from saying more, I shall imagine you expressing everything that an artist would wish to hear said about his work."

"You will not easily go beyond my genuine opinion," answered Hilda, with a smile.

"Ah, your kind word makes me very happy," said the sculptor, "and I need it, just now, on behalf of my Cleopatra. That inevitable period has come,—for I have found it inevitable, in regard to all my works,—when I look at what I fancied to be a statue, lacking only breath to make it live, and find it a mere lump of senseless stone, into which I have not really succeeded in moulding the spiritual part of my idea. I should like, now,—only it would be such shameful treatment for a discrowned queen, and my own offspring too,—I should like to hit poor Cleopatra a bitter blow on her Egyptian nose with this mallet."

"That is a blow which all statues seem doomed to receive, sooner or later, though seldom from the hand that sculptured them," said Hilda, laughing. "But you must not let yourself be too much disheartened by the decay of your faith in what you produce. I have heard a poet express similar distaste for his own most exquisite poem, and I am afraid that this final despair, and sense of short-coming, must always be the reward and punishment of those who try to grapple with a great or beautiful idea. It only proves that you have been able to



imagine things too high for mortal faculties to execute. The idea leaves you an imperfect image of itself, which you at first mistake for the ethereal reality, but soon find that the latter has escaped out of your closest embrace.”

“And the only consolation is,” remarked Kenyon, “that the blurred and imperfect image may still make a very respectable appearance in the eyes of those who have not seen the original.”

“More than that,” rejoined Hilda; “for there is a class of spectators whose sympathy will help them to see the perfect through a mist of imperfection. Nobody, I think, ought to read poetry, or look at pictures or statues, who cannot find a great deal more in them than the poet or artist has actually expressed. Their highest merit is suggestiveness.”

“You, Hilda, are yourself the only critic in whom I have much faith,” said Kenyon. “Had you condemned Cleopatra, nothing should have saved her.”

“You invest me with such an awful responsibility,” she replied, “that I shall not dare to say a single word about your other works.”

“At least,” said the sculptor, “tell me whether you recognize this bust?”

He pointed to a bust of Donatello. It was not the one which Kenyon had begun to model at Monte Beni, but a reminiscence of the Count’s face, wrought under the influence of all the sculptor’s knowledge of his history, and of his personal and hereditary character. It stood on a wooden pedestal, not nearly finished, but with fine white dust and small chips of marble scattered about it, and itself incrustated all round with the white, shapeless substance of the block. In the midst appeared the features, lacking sharpness, and very much resembling a fossil countenance,—but we have already used this simile, in reference to Cleopatra, with the accumulations of long-past ages clinging to it.

And yet, strange to say, the face had an expression, and a more recognizable one than Kenyon had succeeded in putting into the clay model at Monte Beni. The reader is probably acquainted with Thorwaldsen’s three-fold analogy,—the clay model, the Life; the plaster cast, the Death; and the sculptured marble, the Resurrection,—and it seemed to be made good by the spirit that was kindling up these imperfect features, like a lambent flame.

“I was not quite sure, at first glance, that I knew the face,” observed Hilda; “the likeness surely is not a striking one. There is a good deal of external resemblance, still, to the features of the Faun of Praxiteles, between whom and Donatello, you know, we once insisted that there was a perfect twin-brotherhood. But the expression is now so very different!”

“What do you take it to be?” asked the sculptor.



“I hardly know how to define it,” she answered. “But it has an effect as if I could see this countenance gradually brightening while I look at it. It gives the impression of a growing intellectual power and moral sense. Donatello’s face used to evince little more than a genial, pleasurable sort of vivacity, and capability of enjoyment. But here, a soul is being breathed into him; it is the Faun, but advancing towards a state of higher development.”

“Hilda, do you see all this?” exclaimed Kenyon, in considerable surprise. “I may have had such an idea in my mind, but was quite unaware that I had succeeded in conveying it into the marble.”

“Forgive me,” said Hilda, “but I question whether this striking effect has been brought about by any skill or purpose on the sculptor’s part. Is it not, perhaps, the chance result of the bust being just so far shaped out, in the marble, as the process of moral growth had advanced in the original? A few more strokes of the chisel might change the whole expression, and so spoil it for what it is now worth.”

“I believe you are right,” answered Kenyon, thoughtfully examining his work; “and, strangely enough, it was the very expression that I tried unsuccessfully to produce in the clay model. Well; not another chip shall be struck from the marble.”

And, accordingly, Donatello’s bust (like that rude, rough mass of the head of Brutus, by Michael Angelo, at Florence) has ever since remained in an unfinished state. Most spectators mistake it for an unsuccessful attempt towards copying the features of the Faun of Praxiteles. One observer in a thousand is conscious of something more, and lingers long over this mysterious face, departing from it reluctantly, and with many a glance thrown backward. What perplexes him is the riddle that he sees propounded there; the riddle of the soul’s growth, taking its first impulse amid remorse and pain, and struggling through the incrustations of the senses. It was the contemplation of this imperfect portrait of Donatello that originally interested us in his history, and impelled us to elicit from Kenyon what he knew of his friend’s adventures.

