

The  
*Blithedale*  
*Romance*  
by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Chapter 20: They Vanish



Priscilla immediately answered the summons, and made her appearance through the door of the boudoir. I had conceived the idea—which I now recognized as a very foolish one—that Zenobia would have taken measures to debar me from an interview with this girl, between whom and herself there was so utter an opposition of their dearest interests, that, on one part or the other, a great grief, if not likewise a great wrong, seemed a matter of necessity. But, as Priscilla was only a leaf, floating on the dark current of events, without influencing them by her own choice or plan—as she probably guessed not whither the stream was bearing her, nor perhaps even felt its inevitable movement—there could be no peril of her communicating to me any intelligence with regard to Zenobia’s purposes.

On perceiving me, she came forward with great quietude of manner; and when I held out my hand, her own moved slightly towards it, as if attracted by a feeble degree of magnetism.

“I am glad to see you, my dear Priscilla,” said I, still holding her hand. “But everything that I meet with, now-a-days, makes me wonder whether I am awake. You, especially, have always seemed like a figure in a dream—and now more than ever.”

“Oh, there is substance in these fingers of mine!” she answered, giving my hand the faintest possible pressure, and then taking away her own. “Why do you call me a dream? Zenobia is much more like one than I; she is so very, very beautiful! And, I suppose,” added Priscilla, as if thinking aloud, “everybody sees it, as I do.”

But, for my part, it was Priscilla’s beauty, not Zenobia’s, of which I was thinking, at that moment. She was a person who could be quite obliterated, so far as beauty went, by anything unsuitable in her attire; her charm was not positive and material enough to bear up against a



mistaken choice of color, for instance, or fashion. It was safest, in her case, to attempt no art of dress; for it demanded the most perfect taste, or else the happiest accident in the world, to give her precisely the adornment which she needed. She was now dressed in pure white, set off with some kind of a gauzy fabric, which—as I bring up her figure in my memory, with a faint gleam on her shadowy hair, and her dark eyes bent shyly on mine, through all the vanished years—seems to be floating about her like a mist. I wondered what Zenobia meant by evolving so much loveliness out of this poor girl. It was what few women could afford to do; for, as I looked from one to the other, the sheen and splendor of Zenobia's presence took nothing from Priscilla's softer spell, if it might not rather be thought to add to it.

“What do you think of her?” asked Zenobia.

I could not understand the look of melancholy kindness with which Zenobia regarded her. She advanced a step, and beckoning Priscilla near her, kissed her cheek; then, with a slight gesture of repulse, she moved to the other side of the room. I followed.

“She is a wonderful creature,” I said. “Ever since she came among us, I have been dimly sensible of just this charm which you have brought out. But it was never absolutely visible till now. She is as lovely as a flower!”

“Well; say so, if you like,” answered Zenobia. “You are a poet—at least, as poets go, now-a-days—and must be allowed to make an opera-glass of your imagination, when you look at women. I wonder, in such Arcadian freedom of falling in love as we have lately enjoyed, it never occurred to you to fall in love with Priscilla! In society, indeed, a genuine American never dreams of stepping across the inappreciable air-line which separates one class from another. But what was rank to the colonists of Blithedale?”

“There were other reasons,” I replied, “why I should have demonstrated myself an ass, had I fallen in love with Priscilla. By-the-by, has Hollingsworth ever seen her in this dress?”

“Why do you bring up his name, at every turn?” asked Zenobia, in an undertone, and with a malign look which wandered from my face to Priscilla's. “You know not what you do! It is dangerous, sir, believe me, to tamper thus with earnest human passions, out of your own mere idleness, and for your sport. I will endure it no longer! Take care that it does not happen again! I warn you!”

“You partly wrong me, if not wholly,” I responded. “It is an uncertain sense of some duty to perform, that brings my thoughts, and therefore my words, continually to that one point.”

“Oh, this stale excuse of duty!” said Zenobia, in a whisper so full of scorn that it penetrated me like the hiss of a serpent. “I have often heard it before, from those who sought to interfere

with me, and I know precisely what it signifies. Bigotry; self-conceit; an insolent curiosity; a meddling temper; a cold-blooded criticism, founded on a shallow interpretation of half-perceptions; a monstrous scepticism in regard to any conscience or any wisdom, except one's own; a most irreverent propensity to thrust Providence aside, and substitute one's self in its awful place—out of these, and other motives as miserable as these, comes your idea of duty! But beware, sir! With all your fancied acuteness, you step blindfold into these affairs. For any mischief that may follow your interference, I hold you responsible!”

It was evident, that, with but a little further provocation, the lioness would turn to bay; if, indeed, such were not her attitude, already. I bowed, and, not very well knowing what else to do, was about to withdraw. But, glancing again towards Priscilla, who had retreated into a corner, there fell upon my heart an intolerable burthen of despondency, the purport of which I could not tell, but only felt it to bear reference to her. I approached her, and held out my hand; a gesture, however, to which she made no response. It was always one of her peculiarities that she seemed to shrink from even the most friendly touch, unless it were Zenobia's or Hollingsworth's. Zenobia, all this while, stood watching us, but with a careless expression, as if it mattered very little what might pass.

“Priscilla,” I inquired, lowering my voice, “when do you go back to Blithedale?”

“Whenever they please to take me,” said she.

“Did you come away of your own free-will?” I asked.

“I am blown about like a leaf,” she replied. “I never have any free-will.”

“Does Hollingsworth know that you are here?” said I.

“He bade me come,” answered Priscilla.

She looked at me, I thought, with an air of surprise, as if the idea were incomprehensible, that she should have taken this step without his agency.

“What a gripe this man has laid upon her whole being!” muttered I, between my teeth. “Well; as Zenobia so kindly intimates, I have no more business here. I wash my hands of it all. On Hollingsworth's head be the consequences! Priscilla,” I added, aloud, “I know not that ever we may meet again. Farewell!”

As I spoke the word, a carriage had rumbled along the street, and stopt before the house. The door-bell rang, and steps were immediately afterwards heard on the staircase. Zenobia had thrown a shawl over her dress.

“Mr. Coverdale,” said she, with cool courtesy, “you will perhaps excuse us. We have an engagement, and are going out.”

“Whither?” I demanded.

“Is not that a little more than you are entitled to inquire?” said she, with a smile. “At all events, it does not suit me to tell you.”

The door of the drawing-room opened, and Westervelt appeared. I observed that he was elaborately dressed, as if for some grand entertainment. My dislike for this man was infinite. At that moment, it amounted to nothing less than a creeping of the flesh, as when, feeling about in a dark place, one touches something cold and slimy, and questions what the secret hatefulness may be. And, still, I could not but acknowledge, that, for personal beauty, for polish of manner, for all that externally befits a gentleman, there was hardly another like him. After bowing to Zenobia, and graciously saluting Priscilla in her corner, he recognized me by a slight, but courteous inclination.

“Come, Priscilla,” said Zenobia, “it is time. Mr. Coverdale, good evening!”

As Priscilla moved slowly forward, I met her in the middle of the drawing-room.

“Priscilla,” said I, in the hearing of them all, “do you know whither you are going?”

“I do not know,” she answered.

“Is it wise to go?—and is it your choice to go?” I asked. “If not—I am your friend, and Hollingsworth’s friend—tell me so, at once!”

“Possibly,” observed Westervelt, smiling, “Priscilla sees in me an older friend than either Mr. Coverdale or Mr. Hollingsworth. I shall willingly leave the matter at her option.”

While thus speaking, he made a gesture of kindly invitation; and Priscilla passed me, with the gliding movement of a sprite, and took his offered arm. He offered the other to Zenobia. But she turned her proud and beautiful face upon him, with a look which—judging from what I caught of it in profile—would undoubtedly have smitten the man dead, had he possessed any heart, or had this glance attained to it. It seemed to rebound, however, from his courteous visage, like an arrow from polished steel. They all three descended the stairs; and when I likewise reached the street-door, the carriage was already rolling away.