

The Marble Faun

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Chapter 7: Beatrice

Miriam was glad to find the Dove in her turret-home; for being endowed with an infinite activity, and taking exquisite delight in the sweet labor of which her life was full, it was Hilda's practice to flee abroad betimes, and haunt the galleries till dusk. Happy were those (but they were very few) whom she ever chose to be the companions of her day; they saw the art treasures of Rome, under her guidance, as they had never seen them before. Not that Hilda could dissertate, or talk learnedly about pictures; she would probably have been puzzled by the technical terms of her own art. Not that she had much to say about what she most profoundly admired; but even her silent sympathy was so powerful that it drew your own along with it, endowing you with a second-sight that enabled you to see excellences with almost the depth and delicacy of her own perceptions.

All the Anglo-Saxon denizens of Rome, by this time, knew Hilda by sight. Unconsciously, the poor child had become one of the spectacles of the Eternal City, and was often pointed out to strangers, sitting at her easel among the wild-bearded young men, the white-haired old ones, and the shabbily dressed, painfully plain women, who make up the throng of copyists. The old custodes knew her well, and watched over her as their own child. Sometimes a young artist, instead of going on with a copy of the picture before which he had placed his easel, would enrich his canvas with an original portrait of Hilda at her work. A lovelier subject could not have been selected, nor one which required nicer skill and insight in doing it anything like justice. She was pretty at all times, in our native New England style, with her light-brown ringlets, her delicately tinged, but healthful cheek, her sensitive, intelligent, yet most feminine and kindly face. But, every few moments, this pretty and girlish face grew beautiful and striking, as some inward thought and feeling brightened, rose to the surface, and then, as it were, passed out of sight again; so that, taking into view this constantly recurring change, it really seemed as if Hilda were only visible by the sunshine of her soul.

In other respects, she was a good subject for a portrait, being distinguished by a gentle picturesqueness, which was perhaps unconsciously bestowed by some minute peculiarity



of dress, such as artists seldom fail to assume. The effect was to make her appear like an inhabitant of pictureland, a partly ideal creature, not to be handled, nor even approached too closely. In her feminine self, Hilda was natural, and of pleasant deportment, endowed with a mild cheerfulness of temper, not overflowing with animal spirits, but never long despondent. There was a certain simplicity that made every one her friend, but it was combined with a subtle attribute of reserve, that insensibly kept those at a distance who were not suited to her sphere.

Miriam was the dearest friend whom she had ever known. Being a year or two the elder, of longer acquaintance with Italy, and better fitted to deal with its crafty and selfish inhabitants, she had helped Hilda to arrange her way of life, and had encouraged her through those first weeks, when Rome is so dreary to every newcomer.

“But how lucky that you are at home today,” said Miriam, continuing the conversation which was begun, many pages back. “I hardly hoped to find you, though I had a favor to ask,—a commission to put into your charge. But what picture is this?”

“See!” said Hilda, taking her friend’s hand, and leading her in front of the easel. “I wanted your opinion of it.”

“If you have really succeeded,” observed Miriam, recognizing the picture at the first glance, “it will be the greatest miracle you have yet achieved.”

The picture represented simply a female head; a very youthful, girlish, perfectly beautiful face, enveloped in white drapery, from beneath which strayed a lock or two of what seemed a rich, though hidden luxuriance of auburn hair. The eyes were large and brown, and met those of the spectator, but evidently with a strange, ineffectual effort to escape. There was a little redness about the eyes, very slightly indicated, so that you would question whether or no the girl had been weeping. The whole face was quiet; there was no distortion or disturbance of any single feature; nor was it easy to see why the expression was not cheerful, or why a single touch of the artist’s pencil should not brighten it into joyousness. But, in fact, it was the very saddest picture ever painted or conceived; it involved an unfathomable depth of sorrow, the sense of which came to the observer by a sort of intuition. It was a sorrow that removed this beautiful girl out of the sphere of humanity, and set her in a far-off region, the remoteness of which—while yet her face is so close before us—makes us shiver as at a spectre.

“Yes, Hilda,” said her friend, after closely examining the picture, “you have done nothing else so wonderful as this. But by what unheard-of solicitations or secret interest have you obtained leave to copy Guido’s Beatrice Cenci? It is an unexampled favor; and the



impossibility of getting a genuine copy has filled the Roman picture shops with Beatrices, gay, grievous, or coquettish, but never a true one among them.”

“There has been one exquisite copy, I have heard,” said Hilda, “by an artist capable of appreciating the spirit of the picture. It was Thompson, who brought it away piecemeal, being forbidden (like the rest of us) to set up his easel before it. As for me, I knew the Prince Barberini would be deaf to all entreaties; so I had no resource but to sit down before the picture, day after day, and let it sink into my heart. I do believe it is now photographed there. It is a sad face to keep so close to one’s heart; only what is so very beautiful can never be quite a pain. Well; after studying it in this way, I know not how many times, I came home, and have done my best to transfer the image to canvas.”

“Here it is, then,” said Miriam, contemplating Hilda’s work with great interest and delight, mixed with the painful sympathy that the picture excited. “Everywhere we see oil-paintings, crayon sketches, cameos, engravings, lithographs, pretending to be Beatrice, and representing the poor girl with blubbered eyes, a leer of coquetry, a merry look as if she were dancing, a piteous look as if she were beaten, and twenty other modes of fantastic mistake. But here is Guido’s very Beatrice; she that slept in the dungeon, and awoke, betimes, to ascend the scaffold, And now that you have done it, Hilda, can you interpret what the feeling is, that gives this picture such a mysterious force? For my part, though deeply sensible of its influence, I cannot seize it.”

“Nor can I, in words,” replied her friend. “But while I was painting her, I felt all the time as if she were trying to escape from my gaze. She knows that her sorrow is so strange and so immense, that she ought to be solitary forever, both for the world’s sake and her own; and this is the reason we feel such a distance between Beatrice and ourselves, even when our eyes meet hers. It is infinitely heart-breaking to meet her glance, and to feel that nothing can be done to help or comfort her; neither does she ask help or comfort, knowing the hopelessness of her case better than we do. She is a fallen angel,—fallen, and yet sinless; and it is only this depth of sorrow, with its weight and darkness, that keeps her down upon earth, and brings her within our view even while it sets her beyond our reach.”

“You deem her sinless?” asked Miriam; “that is not so plain to me. If I can pretend to see at all into that dim region, whence she gazes so strangely and sadly at us, Beatrice’s own conscience does not acquit her of something evil, and never to be forgiven!”

“Sorrow so black as hers oppresses her very nearly as sin would,” said Hilda.

“Then,” inquired Miriam, “do you think that there was no sin in the deed for which she suffered?”



“Ah!” replied Hilda, shuddering, “I really had quite forgotten Beatrice’s history, and was thinking of her only as the picture seems to reveal her character. Yes, yes; it was terrible guilt, an inexpiable crime, and she feels it to be so. Therefore it is that the forlorn creature so longs to elude our eyes, and forever vanish away into nothingness! Her doom is just!”

“O Hilda, your innocence is like a sharp steel sword!” exclaimed her friend. “Your judgments are often terribly severe, though you seem all made up of gentleness and mercy. Beatrice’s sin may not have been so great: perhaps it was no sin at all, but the best virtue possible in the circumstances. If she viewed it as a sin, it may have been because her nature was too feeble for the fate imposed upon her. Ah!” continued Miriam passionately, “if I could only get within her consciousness!—if I could but clasp Beatrice Cenci’s ghost, and draw it into myself! I would give my life to know whether she thought herself innocent, or the one great criminal since time began.”

As Miriam gave utterance to these words, Hilda looked from the picture into her face, and was startled to observe that her friend’s expression had become almost exactly that of the portrait; as if her passionate wish and struggle to penetrate poor Beatrice’s mystery had been successful.

“O, for Heaven’s sake, Miriam, do not look so!” she cried. “What an actress you are! And I never guessed it before. Ah! now you are yourself again!” she added, kissing her. “Leave Beatrice to me in future.”

“Cover up your magical picture, then,” replied her friend, “else I never can look away from it. It is strange, dear Hilda, how an innocent, delicate, white soul like yours has been able to seize the subtle mystery of this portrait; as you surely must, in order to reproduce it so perfectly. Well; we will not talk of it any more. Do you know, I have come to you this morning on a small matter of business. Will you undertake it for me?”

“O, certainly,” said Hilda, laughing; “if you choose to trust me with business.”

“Nay, it is not a matter of any difficulty,” answered Miriam; “merely to take charge of this packet, and keep it for me awhile.”

“But why not keep it yourself?” asked Hilda.

“Partly because it will be safer in your charge,” said her friend. “I am a careless sort of person in ordinary things; while you, for all you dwell so high above the world, have certain little housewifely ways of accuracy and order. The packet is of some slight importance; and yet, it may be, I shall not ask you for it again. In a week or two, you know, I am leaving Rome. You, setting at defiance the malarial fever, mean to stay here and haunt your beloved



galleries through the summer. Now, four months hence, unless you hear more from me, I would have you deliver the packet according to its address.”

Hilda read the direction; it was to Signore Luca Barboni, at the Plazzo Cenci, third piano.

“I will deliver it with my own hand,” said she, “precisely four months from to-day, unless you bid me to the contrary. Perhaps I shall meet the ghost of Beatrice in that grim old palace of her forefathers.”

“In that case,” rejoined Miriam, “do not fail to speak to her, and try to win her confidence. Poor thing! she would be all the better for pouring her heart out freely, and would be glad to do it, if she were sure of sympathy. It irks my brain and heart to think of her, all shut up within herself.” She withdrew the cloth that Hilda had drawn over the picture, and took another long look at it. “Poor sister Beatrice! for she was still a woman, Hilda, still a sister, be her sin or sorrow what they might. How well you have done it, Hilda! I know not whether Guido will thank you, or be jealous of your rivalship.”

“Jealous, indeed!” exclaimed Hilda. “If Guido had not wrought through me, my pains would have been thrown away.”

“After all,” resumed Miriam, “if a woman had painted the original picture, there might have been something in it which we miss now. I have a great mind to undertake a copy myself; and try to give it what it lacks. Well; goodbye. But, stay! I am going for a little airing to the grounds of the Villa Borghese this afternoon. You will think it very foolish, but I always feel the safer in your company, Hilda, slender little maiden as you are. Will you come?”

“Ah, not to-day, dearest Miriam,” she replied; “I have set my heart on giving another touch or two to this picture, and shall not stir abroad till nearly sunset.”

“Farewell, then,” said her visitor. “I leave you in your dove-cote. What a sweet, strange life you lead here; conversing with the souls of the old masters, feeding and fondling your sister doves, and trimming the Virgin’s lamp! Hilda, do you ever pray to the Virgin while you tend her shrine?”

“Sometimes I have been moved to do so,” replied the Dove, blushing, and lowering her eyes; “she was a woman once. Do you think it would be wrong?”

“Nay, that is for you to judge,” said Miriam; “but when you pray next, dear friend, remember me!”

She went down the long descent of the lower staircase, and just as she reached the street the flock of doves again took their hurried flight from the pavement to the topmost window. She threw her eyes upward and beheld them hovering about Hilda’s head; for, after her



friend's departure, the girl had been more impressed than before by something very sad and troubled in her manner. She was, therefore, leaning forth from her airy abode, and flinging down a kind, maidenly kiss, and a gesture of farewell, in the hope that these might alight upon Miriam's heart, and comfort its unknown sorrow a little. Kenyon the sculptor, who chanced to be passing the head of the street, took note of that ethereal kiss, and wished that he could have caught it in the air and got Hilda's leave to keep it.

