

The Marble Faun

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Chapter 10: The Sylvan Dance

As the music came fresher on their ears, they danced to its cadence, extemporizing new steps and attitudes. Each varying movement had a grace which might have been worth putting into marble, for the long delight of days to come, but vanished with the movement that gave it birth, and was effaced from memory by another. In Miriam's motion, freely as she flung herself into the frolic of the hour, there was still an artful beauty; in Donatello's, there was a charm of indescribable grotesqueness hand in hand with grace; sweet, bewitching, most provocative of laughter, and yet akin to pathos, so deeply did it touch the heart. This was the ultimate peculiarity, the final touch, distinguishing between the sylvan creature and the beautiful companion at his side. Setting apart only this, Miriam resembled a Nymph, as much as Donatello did a Faun.

There were flitting moments, indeed, when she played the sylvan character as perfectly as he. Catching glimpses of her, then, you would have fancied that an oak had sundered its rough bark to let her dance freely forth, endowed with the same spirit in her human form as that which rustles in the leaves; or that she had emerged through the pebbly bottom of a fountain, a water-nymph, to play and sparkle in the sunshine, flinging a quivering light around her, and suddenly disappearing in a shower of rainbow drops.

As the fountain sometimes subsides into its basin, so in Miriam there were symptoms that the frolic of her spirits would at last tire itself out.

"Ah! Donatello," cried she, laughing, as she stopped to take a breath; "you have an unfair advantage over me! I am no true creature of the woods; while you are a real Faun, I do believe. When your curls shook just now, methought I had a peep at the pointed ears."

Donatello snapped his fingers above his head, as fauns and satyrs taught us first to do, and seemed to radiate jollity out of his whole nimble person. Nevertheless, there was a kind of dim apprehension in his face, as if he dreaded that a moment's pause might break the spell, and snatch away the sportive companion whom he had waited for through so many dreary months.



“Dance! Dance!” cried he joyously. “If we take breath, we shall be as we were yesterday. There, now, is the music, just beyond this clump of trees. Dance, Miriam, dance!”

They had now reached an open, grassy glade (of which there are many in that artfully constructed wilderness), set round with stone seats, on which the aged moss had kindly essayed to spread itself instead of cushions. On one of the stone benches sat the musicians, whose strains had enticed our wild couple thitherward. They proved to be a vagrant band, such as Rome, and all Italy, abounds with; comprising a harp, a flute, and a violin, which, though greatly the worse for wear, the performers had skill enough to provoke and modulate into tolerable harmony. It chanced to be a feast-day; and, instead of playing in the sun-scorched piazzas of the city, or beneath the windows of some unresponsive palace, they had bethought themselves to try the echoes of these woods; for, on the festas of the Church, Rome scatters its merrymakers all abroad, ripe for the dance or any other pastime.

As Miriam and Donatello emerged from among the trees, the musicians scraped, tinkled, or blew, each according to his various kind of instrument, more inspiringly than ever. A dark-cheeked little girl, with bright black eyes, stood by, shaking a tambourine set round with tinkling bells, and thumping it on its parchment head. Without interrupting his brisk, though measured movement, Donatello snatched away this unmelodious contrivance, and, flourishing it above his head, produced music of indescribable potency, still dancing with frisky step, and striking the tambourine, and ringing its little bells, all in one jovial act.

It might be that there was magic in the sound, or contagion, at least, in the spirit which had got possession of Miriam and himself, for very soon a number of festal people were drawn to the spot, and struck into the dance, singly or in pairs, as if they were all gone mad with jollity. Among them were some of the plebeian damsels whom we meet bareheaded in the Roman streets, with silver stilettos thrust through their glossy hair; the contadinas, too, from the Campagna and the villages, with their rich and picturesque costumes of scarlet and all bright hues, such as fairer maidens might not venture to put on. Then came the modern Roman from Trastevere, perchance, with his old cloak drawn about him like a toga, which anon, as his active motion heated him, he flung aside. Three French soldiers capered freely into the throng, in wide scarlet trousers, their short swords dangling at their sides; and three German artists in gray flaccid hats and flaunting beards; and one of the Pope’s Swiss guardsmen in the strange motley garb which Michaelangelo contrived for them. Two young English tourists (one of them a lord) took contadine partners and dashed in, as did also a shaggy man in goat-skin breeches, who looked like rustic Pan in person, and footed it as merrily as he. Besides the above there was a herdsman or two from the Campagna, and a few



peasants in sky-blue jackets, and small-clothes tied with ribbons at the knees; haggard and sallow were these last, poor serfs, having little to eat and nothing but the malaria to breathe; but still they plucked up a momentary spirit and joined hands in Donatello's dance.

Here, as it seemed, had the Golden Age come back again within the Precincts of this sunny glade, thawing mankind out of their cold formalities, releasing them from irksome restraint, mingling them together in such childlike gayety that new flowers (of which the old bosom of the earth is full) sprang up beneath their footsteps. The sole exception to the geniality of the moment, as we have understood, was seen in a countryman of our own, who sneered at the spectacle, and declined to compromise his dignity by making part of it.

The harper thrummed with rapid fingers; the violin player flashed his bow back and forth across the strings; the flautist poured his breath in quick puffs of jollity, while Donatello shook the tambourine above his head, and led the merry throng with unweariable steps. As they followed one another in a wild ring of mirth, it seemed the realization of one of those bas-reliefs where a dance of nymphs, satyrs, or bacchanals is twined around the circle of an antique vase; or it was like the sculptured scene on the front and sides of a sarcophagus, where, as often as any other device, a festive procession mocks the ashes and white bones that are treasured up within. You might take it for a marriage pageant; but after a while, if you look at these merry-makers, following them from end to end of the marble coffin, you doubt whether their gay movement is leading them to a happy close. A youth has suddenly fallen in the dance; a chariot is overturned and broken, flinging the charioteer headlong to the ground; a maiden seems to have grown faint or weary, and is drooping on the bosom of a friend. Always some tragic incident is shadowed forth or thrust sidelong into the spectacle; and when once it has caught your eye you can look no more at the festal portions of the scene, except with reference to this one slightly suggested doom and sorrow.

As in its mirth, so in the darker characteristic here alluded to, there was an analogy between the sculptured scene on the sarcophagus and the wild dance which we have been describing. In the midst of its madness and riot Miriam found herself suddenly confronted by a strange figure that shook its fantastic garments in the air, and pranced before her on its tiptoes, almost vying with the agility of Donatello himself. It was the model.

A moment afterwards Donatello was aware that she had retired from the dance. He hastened towards her, and flung himself on the grass beside the stone bench on which Miriam was sitting. But a strange distance and unapproachableness had all at once enveloped her; and though he saw her within reach of his arm, yet the light of her eyes seemed as far off as



that of a star, nor was there any warmth in the melancholy smile with which she regarded him.

“Come back!” cried he. “Why should this happy hour end so soon?”

“It must end here, Donatello,” said she, in answer to his words and outstretched hand; “and such hours, I believe, do not often repeat themselves in a lifetime. Let me go, my friend; let me vanish from you quietly among the shadows of these trees. See, the companions of our pastime are vanishing already!”

Whether it was that the harp-strings were broken, the violin out of tune, or the flautist out of breath, so it chanced that the music had ceased, and the dancers come abruptly to a pause. All that motley throng of rioters was dissolved as suddenly as it had been drawn together. In Miriam’s remembrance the scene had a character of fantasy. It was as if a company of satyrs, fauns, and nymphs, with Pan in the midst of them, had been disporting themselves in these venerable woods only a moment ago; and now in another moment, because some profane eye had looked at them too closely, or some intruder had cast a shadow on their mirth, the sylvan pageant had utterly disappeared. If a few of the merry-makers lingered among the trees, they had hidden their racy peculiarities under the garb and aspect of ordinary people, and sheltered themselves in the weary commonplace of daily life. Just an instant before it was Arcadia and the Golden Age. The spell being broken, it was now only that old tract of pleasure ground, close by the people’s gate of Rome,—a tract where the crimes and calamities of ages, the many battles, blood recklessly poured out, and deaths of myriads, have corrupted all the soil, creating an influence that makes the air deadly to human lungs.

“You must leave me,” said Miriam to Donatello more imperatively than before; “have I not said it? Go; and look not behind you.”

“Miriam,” whispered Donatello, grasping her hand forcibly, “who is it that stands in the shadow yonder, beckoning you to follow him?”

“Hush; leave me!” repeated Miriam. “Your hour is past; his hour has come.”

Donatello still gazed in the direction which he had indicated, and the expression of his face was fearfully changed, being so disordered, perhaps with terror,—at all events with anger and invincible repugnance,—that Miriam hardly knew him. His lips were drawn apart so as to disclose his set teeth, thus giving him a look of animal rage, which we seldom see except in persons of the simplest and rudest natures. A shudder seemed to pass through his very bones.

“I hate him!” muttered he.

“Be satisfied; I hate him too!” said Miriam.



She had no thought of making this avowal, but was irresistibly drawn to it by the sympathy of the dark emotion in her own breast with that so strongly expressed by Donatello. Two drops of water or of blood do not more naturally flow into each other than did her hatred into his.

“Shall I clutch him by the throat?” whispered Donatello, with a savage scowl. “Bid me do so, and we are rid of him forever.”

“In Heaven’s name, no violence!” exclaimed Miriam, affrighted out of the scornful control which she had hitherto held over her companion, by the fierceness that he so suddenly developed. “O, have pity on me, Donatello, if for nothing else, yet because in the midst of my wretchedness I let myself be your playmate for this one wild hour! Follow me no farther. Henceforth leave me to my doom. Dear friend,—kind, simple, loving friend,—make me not more wretched by the remembrance of having thrown fierce hates or loves into the wellspring of your happy life!”

“Not follow you!” repeated Donatello, soothed from anger into sorrow, less by the purport of what she said, than by the melancholy sweetness of her voice,—“not follow you! What other path have I?”

“We will talk of it once again,” said Miriam still soothingly; “soon—to-morrow when you will; only leave me now.”

