

The Marble Faun

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Chapter 25: Sunshine

“Come,” said the Count, “I see you already find the old house dismal. So do I, indeed! And yet it was a cheerful place in my boyhood. But, you see, in my father’s days (and the same was true of all my endless line of grandfathers, as I have heard), there used to be uncles, aunts, and all manner of kindred, dwelling together as one family. They were a merry and kindly race of people, for the most part, and kept one another’s hearts warm.”

“Two hearts might be enough for warmth,” observed the sculptor, “even in so large a house as this. One solitary heart, it is true, may be apt to shiver a little. But, I trust, my friend, that the genial blood of your race still flows in many veins besides your own?”

“I am the last,” said Donatello gloomily. “They have all vanished from me, since my childhood. Old Tomaso will tell you that the air of Monte Beni is not so favorable to length of days as it used to be. But that is not the secret of the quick extinction of my kindred.”

“Then you are aware of a more satisfactory reason?” suggested Kenyon.

“I thought of one, the other night, while I was gazing at the stars,” answered Donatello; “but, pardon me, I do not mean to tell it. One cause, however, of the longer and healthier life of my forefathers was, that they had many pleasant customs, and means of making themselves glad, and their guests and friends along with them. Nowadays we have but one!”

“And what is that?” asked the sculptor.

“You shall see!” said his young host.

By this time, he had ushered the sculptor into one of the numberless saloons; and, calling for refreshment, old Stella placed a cold fowl upon the table, and quickly followed it with a savory omelet, which Girolamo had lost no time in preparing. She also brought some cherries, plums, and apricots, and a plate full of particularly delicate figs, of last year’s growth. The butler showing his white head at the door, his master beckoned to him. “Tomaso, bring some Sunshine!” said he. The readiest method of obeying this order, one might suppose, would have been to fling wide the green window-blinds, and let the glow of the summer noon into the carefully shaded room. But, at Monte Beni, with provident caution against



the wintry days, when there is little sunshine, and the rainy ones, when there is none, it was the hereditary custom to keep their Sunshine stored away in the cellar. Old Tomaso quickly produced some of it in a small, straw-covered flask, out of which he extracted the cork, and inserted a little cotton wool, to absorb the olive oil that kept the precious liquid from the air.

“This is a wine,” observed the Count, “the secret of making which has been kept in our family for centuries upon centuries; nor would it avail any man to steal the secret, unless he could also steal the vineyard, in which alone the Monte Beni grape can be produced. There is little else left me, save that patch of vines. Taste some of their juice, and tell me whether it is worthy to be called Sunshine! for that is its name.”

“A glorious name, too!” cried the sculptor.

“Taste it,” said Donatello, filling his friend’s glass, and pouring likewise a little into his own. “But first smell its fragrance; for the wine is very lavish of it, and will scatter it all abroad.”

“Ah, how exquisite!” said Kenyon. “No other wine has a bouquet like this. The flavor must be rare, indeed, if it fulfill the promise of this fragrance, which is like the airy sweetness of youthful hopes, that no realities will ever satisfy!”

This invaluable liquor was of a pale golden hue, like other of the rarest Italian wines, and, if carelessly and irreligiously quaffed, might have been mistaken for a very fine sort of champagne. It was not, however, an effervescing wine, although its delicate piquancy produced a somewhat similar effect upon the palate. Sipping, the guest longed to sip again; but the wine demanded so deliberate a pause, in order to detect the hidden peculiarities and subtle exquisiteness of its flavor, that to drink it was really more a moral than a physical enjoyment. There was a deliciousness in it that eluded analysis, and—like whatever else is superlatively good—was perhaps better appreciated in the memory than by present consciousness.

One of its most ethereal charms lay in the transitory life of the wine’s richest qualities; for, while it required a certain leisure and delay, yet, if you lingered too long upon the draught, it became disenchanted both of its fragrance and its flavor.

The lustre should not be forgotten, among the other admirable endowments of the Monte Beni wine; for, as it stood in Kenyon’s glass, a little circle of light glowed on the table round about it, as if it were really so much golden sunshine.

“I feel myself a better man for that ethereal potation,” observed the sculptor. “The finest Orvieto, or that famous wine, the Est Est Est of Montefiascone, is vulgar in comparison. This is surely the wine of the Golden Age, such as Bacchus himself first taught mankind to



press from the choicest of his grapes. My dear Count, why is it not illustrious? The pale, liquid gold, in every such flask as that, might be solidified into golden scudi, and would quickly make you a millionaire!”

Tomaso, the old butler, who was standing by the table, and enjoying the praises of the wine quite as much as if bestowed upon himself, made answer,—“We have a tradition, Signore,” said he, “that this rare wine of our vineyard would lose all its wonderful qualities, if any of it were sent to market. The Counts of Monte Beni have never parted with a single flask of it for gold. At their banquets, in the olden time, they have entertained princes, cardinals, and once an emperor and once a pope, with this delicious wine, and always, even to this day, it has been their custom to let it flow freely, when those whom they love and honor sit at the board. But the grand duke himself could not drink that wine, except it were under this very roof!”

“What you tell me, my good friend,” replied Kenyon, “makes me venerate the Sunshine of Monte Beni even more abundantly than before. As I understand you, it is a sort of consecrated juice, and symbolizes the holy virtues of hospitality and social kindness?”

“Why, partly so, Signore,” said the old butler, with a shrewd twinkle in his eye; “but, to speak out all the truth, there is another excellent reason why neither a cask nor a flask of our precious vintage should ever be sent to market. The wine, Signore, is so fond of its native home, that a transportation of even a few miles turns it quite sour. And yet it is a wine that keeps well in the cellar, underneath this floor, and gathers fragrance, flavor, and brightness, in its dark dungeon. That very flask of Sunshine, now, has kept itself for you, sir guest (as a maid reserves her sweetness till her lover comes for it), ever since a merry vintage-time, when the Signore Count here was a boy!”

“You must not wait for Tomaso to end his discourse about the wine, before drinking off your glass,” observed Donatello. “When once the flask is uncorked, its finest qualities lose little time in making their escape. I doubt whether your last sip will be quite so delicious as you found the first.”

And, in truth, the sculptor fancied that the Sunshine became almost imperceptibly clouded, as he approached the bottom of the flask. The effect of the wine, however, was a gentle exhilaration, which did not so speedily pass away.

Being thus refreshed, Kenyon looked around him at the antique saloon in which they sat. It was constructed in a most ponderous style, with a stone floor, on which heavy pilasters were planted against the wall, supporting arches that crossed one another in the vaulted ceiling. The upright walls, as well as the compartments of the roof, were completely Covered with



frescos, which doubtless had been brilliant when first executed, and perhaps for generations afterwards. The designs were of a festive and joyous character, representing Arcadian scenes, where nymphs, fauns, and satyrs disported themselves among mortal youths and maidens; and Pan, and the god of wine, and he of sunshine and music, disdained not to brighten some sylvan merry-making with the scarcely veiled glory of their presence. A wreath of dancing figures, in admirable variety of shape and motion, was festooned quite round the cornice of the room.

In its first splendor, the saloon must have presented an aspect both gorgeous and enlivening; for it invested some of the cheerfullest ideas and emotions of which the human mind is susceptible with the external reality of beautiful form, and rich, harmonious glow and variety of color. But the frescos were now very ancient. They had been rubbed and scrubbed by old Stein and many a predecessor, and had been defaced in one spot, and retouched in another, and had peeled from the wall in patches, and had hidden some of their brightest portions under dreary dust, till the joyousness had quite vanished out of them all. It was often difficult to puzzle out the design; and even where it was more readily intelligible, the figures showed like the ghosts of dead and buried joys,—the closer their resemblance to the happy past, the gloomier now. For it is thus, that with only an inconsiderable change, the gladdest objects and existences become the saddest; hope fading into disappointment; joy darkening into grief, and festal splendor into funereal duskiness; and all evolving, as their moral, a grim identity between gay things and sorrowful ones. Only give them a little time, and they turn out to be just alike!

“There has been much festivity in this saloon, if I may judge by the character of its frescos,” remarked Kenyon, whose spirits were still upheld by the mild potency of the Monte Beni wine. “Your forefathers, my dear Count, must have been joyous fellows, keeping up the vintage merriment throughout the year. It does me good to think of them gladdening the hearts of men and women, with their wine of Sunshine, even in the Iron Age, as Pan and Bacchus, whom we see yonder, did in the Golden one!”

“Yes; there have been merry times in the banquet hall of Monte Beni, even within my own remembrance,” replied Donatello, looking gravely at the painted walls. “It was meant for mirth, as you see; and when I brought my own cheerfulness into the saloon, these frescos looked cheerful too. But, methinks, they have all faded since I saw them last.”

“It would be a good idea,” said the sculptor, falling into his companion’s vein, and helping him out with an illustration which Donatello himself could not have put into shape, “to convert this saloon into a chapel; and when the priest tells his hearers of the instability



of earthly joys, and would show how drearily they vanish, he may point to these pictures, that were so joyous and are so dismal. He could not illustrate his theme so aptly in any other way.”

“True, indeed,” answered the Count, his former simplicity strangely mixing itself up with an experience that had changed him; “and yonder, where the minstrels used to stand, the altar shall be placed. A sinful man might do all the more effective penance in this old banquet hall.”

“But I should regret to have suggested so ungenial a transformation in your hospitable saloon,” continued Kenyon, duly noting the change in Donatello’s characteristics. “You startle me, my friend, by so ascetic a design! It would hardly have entered your head, when we first met. Pray do not,—if I may take the freedom of a somewhat elder man to advise you,” added he, smiling,—“pray do not, under a notion of improvement, take upon yourself to be sombre, thoughtful, and penitential, like all the rest of us.”

Donatello made no answer, but sat awhile, appearing to follow with his eyes one of the figures, which was repeated many times over in the groups upon the walls and ceiling. It formed the principal link of an allegory, by which (as is often the case in such pictorial designs) the whole series of frescos were bound together, but which it would be impossible, or, at least, very wearisome, to unravel. The sculptor’s eyes took a similar direction, and soon began to trace through the vicissitudes,—once gay, now sombre,—in which the old artist had involved it, the same individual figure. He fancied a resemblance in it to Donatello himself; and it put him in mind of one of the purposes with which he had come to Monte Beni.

“My dear Count,” said he, “I have a proposal to make. You must let me employ a little of my leisure in modelling your bust. You remember what a striking resemblance we all of us—Hilda, Miriam, and I—found between your features and those of the Faun of Praxiteles. Then, it seemed an identity; but now that I know your face better, the likeness is far less apparent. Your head in marble would be a treasure to me. Shall I have it?”

“I have a weakness which I fear I cannot overcome,” replied the Count, turning away his face. “It troubles me to be looked at steadfastly.”

“I have observed it since we have been sitting here, though never before,” rejoined the sculptor. “It is a kind of nervousness, I apprehend, which, you caught in the Roman air, and which grows upon you, in your solitary life. It need be no hindrance to my taking your bust; for I will catch the likeness and expression by side glimpses, which (if portrait painters and bust makers did but know it) always bring home richer results than a broad stare.”



“You may take me if you have the power,” said Donatello; but, even as he spoke, he turned away his face; “and if you can see what makes me shrink from you, you are welcome to put it in the bust. It is not my will, but my necessity, to avoid men’s eyes. Only,” he added, with a smile which made Kenyon doubt whether he might not as well copy the Faun as model a new bust,—“only, you know, you must not insist on my uncovering these ears of mine!”

“Nay; I never should dream of such a thing,” answered the sculptor, laughing, as the young Count shook his clustering curls. “I could not hope to persuade you, remembering how Miriam once failed!”

Nothing is more unaccountable than the spell that often lurks in a spoken word. A thought may be present to the mind, so distinctly that no utterance could make it more so; and two minds may be conscious of the same thought, in which one or both take the profoundest interest; but as long as it remains unspoken, their familiar talk flows quietly over the hidden idea, as a rivulet may sparkle and dimple over something sunken in its bed. But speak the word, and it is like bringing up a drowned body out of the deepest pool of the rivulet, which has been aware of the horrible secret all along, in spite of its smiling surface.

And even so, when Kenyon chanced to make a distinct reference to Donatello’s relations with Miriam (though the subject was already in both their minds), a ghastly emotion rose up out of the depths of the young Count’s heart. He trembled either with anger or terror, and glared at the sculptor with wild eyes, like a wolf that meets you in the forest, and hesitates whether to flee or turn to bay. But, as Kenyon still looked calmly at him, his aspect gradually became less disturbed, though far from resuming its former quietude.

“You have spoken her name,” said he, at last, in an altered and tremulous tone; “tell me, now, all that you know of her.”

“I scarcely think that I have any later intelligence than yourself,” answered Kenyon; “Miriam left Rome at about the time of your own departure. Within a day or two after our last meeting at the Church of the Capuchins, I called at her studio and found it vacant. Whither she has gone, I cannot tell.”

Donatello asked no further questions.

They rose from table, and strolled together about the premises, whiling away the afternoon with brief intervals of unsatisfactory conversation, and many shadowy silences. The sculptor had a perception of change in his companion,—possibly of growth and development, but certainly of change,—which saddened him, because it took away much of the simple grace that was the best of Donatello’s peculiarities.



Kenyon betook himself to repose that night in a grim, old, vaulted apartment, which, in the lapse of five or six centuries, had probably been the birth, bridal, and death chamber of a great many generations of the Monte Beni family. He was aroused, soon after daylight, by the clamor of a tribe of beggars who had taken their stand in a little rustic lane that crept beside that portion of the villa, and were addressing their petitions to the open windows. By and by they appeared to have received alms, and took their departure.

“Some charitable Christian has sent those vagabonds away,” thought the sculptor, as he resumed his interrupted nap; “who could it be? Donatello has his own rooms in the tower; Stella, Tomaso, and the cook are a world’s width off; and I fancied myself the only inhabitant in this part of the house.”

In the breadth and space which so delightfully characterize an Italian villa, a dozen guests might have had each his suite of apartments without infringing upon one another’s ample precincts. But, so far as Kenyon knew, he was the only visitor beneath Donatello’s widely extended roof.

