

The Marble Faun

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Chapter 31: The Marble Saloon

In an old Tuscan villa, a chapel ordinarily makes one among the numerous apartments; though it often happens that the door is permanently closed, the key lost, and the place left to itself, in dusty sanctity, like that chamber in man's heart where he hides his religious awe. This was very much the case with the chapel of Monte Beni. One rainy day, however, in his wanderings through the great, intricate house, Kenyon had unexpectedly found his way into it, and been impressed by its solemn aspect. The arched windows, high upward in the wall, and darkened with dust and cobweb, threw down a dim light that showed the altar, with a picture of a martyrdom above, and some tall tapers ranged before it. They had apparently been lighted, and burned an hour or two, and been extinguished perhaps half a century before. The marble vase at the entrance held some hardened mud at the bottom, accruing from the dust that had settled in it during the gradual evaporation of the holy water; and a spider (being an insect that delights in pointing the moral of desolation and neglect) had taken pains to weave a prodigiously thick tissue across the circular brim. An old family banner, tattered by the moths, drooped from the vaulted roof. In niches there were some mediaeval busts of Donatello's forgotten ancestry; and among them, it might be, the forlorn visage of that hapless knight between whom and the fountain-nymph had occurred such tender love passages.

Throughout all the jovial prosperity of Monte Beni, this one spot within the domestic walls had kept itself silent, stern, and sad. When the individual or the family retired from song and mirth, they here sought those realities which men do not invite their festive associates to share. And here, on the occasion above referred to, the sculptor had discovered—accidentally, so far as he was concerned, though with a purpose on her part—that there was a guest under Donatello's roof, whose presence the Count did not suspect. An interview had since taken place, and he was now summoned to another.

He crossed the chapel, in compliance with Tomaso's instructions, and, passing through the side entrance, found himself in a saloon, of no great size, but more magnificent than he



had supposed the villa to contain. As it was vacant, Kenyon had leisure to pace it once or twice, and examine it with a careless sort of scrutiny, before any person appeared.

This beautiful hall was floored with rich marbles, in artistically arranged figures and compartments. The walls, likewise, were almost entirely cased in marble of various kinds, the prevalent, variety being giallo antico, intermixed with verd-antique, and others equally precious. The splendor of the giallo antico, however, was what gave character to the saloon; and the large and deep niches, apparently intended for full length statues, along the walls, were lined with the same costly material. Without visiting Italy, one can have no idea of the beauty and magnificence that are produced by these fittings-up of polished marble. Without such experience, indeed, we do not even know what marble means, in any sense, save as the white limestone of which we carve our mantelpieces. This rich hall of Monte Beni, moreover, was adorned, at its upper end, with two pillars that seemed to consist of Oriental alabaster; and wherever there was a space vacant of precious and variegated marble, it was frescoed with ornaments in arabesque. Above, there was a coved and vaulted ceiling, glowing with pictured scenes, which affected Kenyon with a vague sense of splendor, without his twisting his neck to gaze at them.

It is one of the special excellences of such a saloon of polished and richly colored marble, that decay can never tarnish it. Until the house crumbles down upon it, it shines indestructibly, and, with a little dusting, looks just as brilliant in its three hundredth year as the day after the final slab of giallo antico was fitted into the wall. To the sculptor, at this first view of it, it seemed a hall where the sun was magically imprisoned, and must always shine. He anticipated Miriam's entrance, arrayed in queenly robes, and beaming with even more than the singular beauty that had heretofore distinguished her.

While this thought was passing through his mind, the pillared door, at the upper end of the saloon, was partly opened, and Miriam appeared. She was very pale, and dressed in deep mourning. As she advanced towards the sculptor, the feebleness of her step was so apparent that he made haste to meet her, apprehending that she might sink down on the marble floor, without the instant support of his arm.

But, with a gleam of her natural self-reliance, she declined his aid, and, after touching her cold hand to his, went and sat down on one of the cushioned divans that were ranged against the wall.

"You are very ill, Miriam!" said Kenyon, much shocked at her appearance. "I had not thought of this."



“No; not so ill as I seem to you,” she answered; adding despondently, “yet I am ill enough, I believe, to die, unless some change speedily occurs.”

“What, then, is your disorder?” asked the sculptor; “and what the remedy?”

“The disorder!” repeated Miriam. “There is none that I know of save too much life and strength, without a purpose for one or the other. It is my too redundant energy that is slowly—or perhaps rapidly—wearing me away, because I can apply it to no use. The object, which I am bound to consider my only one on earth, fails me utterly. The sacrifice which I yearn to make of myself, my hopes, my everything, is coldly put aside. Nothing is left for me but to brood, brood, brood, all day, all night, in unprofitable longings and repinings.”

“This is very sad, Miriam,” said Kenyon.

“Ay, indeed; I fancy so,” she replied, with a short, unnatural laugh.

“With all your activity of mind,” resumed he, “so fertile in plans as I have known you, can you imagine no method of bringing your resources into play?”

“My mind is not active any longer,” answered Miriam, in a cold, indifferent tone. “It deals with one thought and no more. One recollection paralyzes it. It is not remorse; do not think it! I put myself out of the question, and feel neither regret nor penitence on my own behalf. But what benumbs me, what robs me of all power,—it is no secret for a woman to tell a man, yet I care not though you know it, —is the certainty that I am, and must ever be, an object of horror in Donatello’s sight.”

The sculptor—a young man, and cherishing a love which insulated him from the wild experiences which some men gather—was startled to perceive how Miriam’s rich, ill-regulated nature impelled her to fling herself, conscience and all, on one passion, the object of which intellectually seemed far beneath her.

“How have you obtained the certainty of which you speak?” asked he, after a pause.

“O, by a sure token,” said Miriam; “a gesture, merely; a shudder, a cold shiver, that ran through him one sunny morning when his hand happened to touch mine! But it was enough.”

“I firmly believe, Miriam,” said the sculptor, “that he loves you still.”

She started, and a flush of color came tremulously over the paleness of her cheek.

“Yes,” repeated Kenyon, “if my interest in Donatello—and in yourself, Miriam—endows me with any true insight, he not only loves you still, but with a force and depth proportioned to the stronger grasp of his faculties, in their new development.”

“Do not deceive me,” said Miriam, growing pale again.



“Not for the world!” replied Kenyon. “Here is what I take to be the truth. There was an interval, no doubt, when the horror of some calamity, which I need not shape out in my conjectures, threw Donatello into a stupor of misery. Connected with the first shock there was an intolerable pain and shuddering repugnance attaching themselves to all the circumstances and surroundings of the event that so terribly affected him. Was his dearest friend involved within the horror of that moment? He would shrink from her as he shrank most of all from himself. But as his mind roused itself,—as it rose to a higher life than he had hitherto experienced,—whatever had been true and permanent within him revived by the selfsame impulse. So has it been with his love.”

“But, surely,” said Miriam, “he knows that I am here! Why, then, except that I am odious to him, does he not bid me welcome?”

“He is, I believe, aware of your presence here,” answered the sculptor. “Your song, a night or two ago, must have revealed it to him, and, in truth, I had fancied that there was already a consciousness of it in his mind. But, the more passionately he longs for your society, the more religiously he deems himself bound to avoid it. The idea of a lifelong penance has taken strong possession of Donatello. He gropes blindly about him for some method of sharp self-torture, and finds, of course, no other so efficacious as this.”

“But he loves me,” repeated Miriam, in a low voice, to herself. “Yes; he loves me!”

It was strange to observe the womanly softness that came over her, as she admitted that comfort into her bosom. The cold, unnatural indifference of her manner, a kind of frozen passionateness which had shocked and chilled the sculptor, disappeared. She blushed, and turned away her eyes, knowing that there was more surprise and joy in their dewy glances than any man save one ought to detect there.

“In other respects,” she inquired at length, “is he much changed?”

“A wonderful process is going forward in Donatello’s mind,” answered the sculptor. “The germs of faculties that have heretofore slept are fast springing into activity. The world of thought is disclosing itself to his inward sight. He startles me, at times, with his perception of deep truths; and, quite as often, it must be owned, he compels me to smile by the intermixture of his former simplicity with a new intelligence. But he is bewildered with the revelations that each day brings. Out of his bitter agony, a soul and intellect, I could almost say, have been inspired into him.”

“Ah, I could help him here!” cried Miriam, clasping her hands. “And how sweet a toil to bend and adapt my whole nature to do him good! To instruct, to elevate, to enrich his mind with the wealth that would flow in upon me, had I such a motive for acquiring it!



Who else can perform the task? Who else has the tender sympathy which he requires? Who else, save only me,—a woman, a sharer in the same dread secret, a partaker in one identical guilt,—could meet him on such terms of intimate equality as the case demands? With this object before me, I might feel a right to live! Without it, it is a shame for me to have lived so long.”

“I fully agree with you,” said Kenyon, “that your true place is by his side.”

“Surely it is,” replied Miriam. “If Donatello is entitled to aught on earth, it is to my complete self-sacrifice for his sake. It does not weaken his claim, methinks, that my only prospect of happiness a fearful word, however lies in the good that may accrue to him from our intercourse. But he rejects me! He will not listen to the whisper of his heart, telling him that she, most wretched, who beguiled him into evil, might guide him to a higher innocence than that from which he fell. How is this first great difficulty to be obviated?”

“It lies at your own option, Miriam, to do away the obstacle, at any moment,” remarked the sculptor. “It is but to ascend Donatello’s tower, and you will meet him there, under the eye of God.”

“I dare not,” answered Miriam. “No; I dare not!”

“Do you fear,” asked the sculptor, “the dread eye-witness whom I have named?”

“No; for, as far as I can see into that cloudy and inscrutable thing, my heart, it has none but pure motives,” replied Miriam. “But, my friend, you little know what a weak or what a strong creature a woman is! I fear not Heaven, in this case, at least, but—shall I confess it? I am greatly in dread of Donatello. Once he shuddered at my touch. If he shudder once again, or frown, I die!”

Kenyon could not but marvel at the subjection into which this proud and self-dependent woman had willfully flung herself, hanging her life upon the chance of an angry or favorable regard from a person who, a little while before, had seemed the plaything of a moment. But, in Miriam’s eyes, Donatello was always, thenceforth, invested with the tragic dignity of their hour of crime; and, furthermore, the keen and deep insight, with which her love endowed her, enabled her to know him far better than he could be known by ordinary observation. Beyond all question, since she loved him so, there was a force in Donatello worthy of her respect and love.

“You see my weakness,” said Miriam, flinging out her hands, as a person does when a defect is acknowledged, and beyond remedy. “What I need, now, is an opportunity to show my strength.”



“It has occurred to me,” Kenyon remarked, “that the time is come when it may be desirable to remove Donatello from the complete seclusion in which he buries himself. He has struggled long enough with one idea. He now needs a variety of thought, which cannot be otherwise so readily supplied to him, as through the medium of a variety of scenes. His mind is awakened, now; his heart, though full of pain, is no longer benumbed. They should have food and solace. If he linger here much longer, I fear that he may sink back into a lethargy. The extreme excitability, which circumstances have imparted to his moral system, has its dangers and its advantages; it being one of the dangers, that an obdurate scar may supervene upon its very tenderness. Solitude has done what it could for him; now, for a while, let him be enticed into the outer world.”

“What is your plan, then?” asked Miriam.

“Simply,” replied Kenyon, “to persuade Donatello to be my companion in a ramble among these hills and valleys. The little adventures and vicissitudes of travel will do him infinite good. After his recent profound experience, he will re-create the world by the new eyes with which he will regard it. He will escape, I hope, out of a morbid life, and find his way into a healthy one.”

“And what is to be my part in this process?” inquired Miriam sadly, and not without jealousy. “You are taking him from me, and putting yourself, and all manner of living interests, into the place which I ought to fill!”

“It would rejoice me, Miriam, to yield the entire responsibility of this office to yourself,” answered the sculptor. “I do not pretend to be the guide and counsellor whom Donatello needs; for, to mention no other obstacle, I am a man, and between man and man there is always an insuperable gulf. They can never quite grasp each other’s hands; and therefore man never derives any intimate help, any heart sustenance, from his brother man, but from woman—his mother, his sister, or his wife. Be Donatello’s friend at need, therefore, and most gladly will I resign him!”

“It is not kind to taunt me thus,” said Miriam. “I have told you that I cannot do what you suggest, because I dare not.”

“Well, then,” rejoined the sculptor, “see if there is any possibility of adapting yourself to my scheme. The incidents of a journey often fling people together in the oddest and therefore the most natural way. Supposing you were to find yourself on the same route, a reunion with Donatello might ensue, and Providence have a larger hand in it than either of us.”

“It is not a hopeful plan,” said Miriam, shaking her head, after a moment’s thought; “yet I will not reject it without a trial. Only in case it fail, here is a resolution to which I



bind myself, come what come may! You know the bronze statue of Pope Julius in the great square of Perugia? I remember standing in the shadow of that statue one sunny noontime, and being impressed by its paternal aspect, and fancying that a blessing fell upon me from its outstretched hand. Ever since, I have had a superstition, you will call it foolish, but sad and ill-fated persons always dream such things,—that, if I waited long enough in that same spot, some good event would come to pass. Well, my friend, precisely a fortnight after you begin your tour,—unless we sooner meet,—bring Donatello, at noon, to the base of the statue. You will find me there!”

Kenyon assented to the proposed arrangement, and, after some conversation respecting his contemplated line of travel, prepared to take his leave. As he met Miriam’s eyes, in bidding farewell, he was surprised at the new, tender gladness that beamed out of them, and at the appearance of health and bloom, which, in this little while, had overspread her face.’

“May I tell you, Miriam,” said he, smiling, “that you are still as beautiful as ever?”

“You have a right to notice it,” she replied, “for, if it be so, my faded bloom has been revived by the hopes you give me. Do you, then, think me beautiful? I rejoice, most truly. Beauty—if I possess it—shall be one of the instruments by which I will try to educate and elevate him, to whose good I solely dedicate myself.”

The sculptor had nearly reached the door, when, hearing her call him, he turned back, and beheld Miriam still standing where he had left her, in the magnificent hall which seemed only a fit setting for her beauty. She beckoned him to return.

“You are a man of refined taste,” said she; “more than that,—a man of delicate sensibility. Now tell me frankly, and on your honor! Have I not shocked you many times during this interview by my betrayal of woman’s cause, my lack of feminine modesty, my reckless, passionate, most indecorous avowal, that I live only in the life of one who, perhaps, scorns and shudders at me?”

Thus adjured, however difficult the point to which she brought him, the sculptor was not a man to swerve aside from the simple truth.

“Miriam,” replied he, “you exaggerate the impression made upon my mind; but it has been painful, and somewhat of the character which you suppose.”

“I knew it,” said Miriam, mournfully, and with no resentment. “What remains of my finer nature would have told me so, even if it had not been perceptible in all your manner. Well, my dear friend, when you go back to Rome, tell Hilda what her severity has done! She was all womanhood to me; and when she cast me off, I had no longer any terms to keep with



the reserves and decorums of my sex. Hilda has set me free! Pray tell her so, from Miriam, and thank her!”

“I shall tell Hilda nothing that will give her pain,” answered Kenyon. “But, Miriam, though I know not what passed between her and yourself, I feel,—and let the noble frankness of your disposition forgive me if I say so,—I feel that she was right. You have a thousand admirable qualities. Whatever mass of evil may have fallen into your life, —pardon me, but your own words suggest it,—you are still as capable as ever of many high and heroic virtues. But the white shining purity of Hilda’s nature is a thing apart; and she is bound, by the undefiled material of which God moulded her, to keep that severity which I, as well as you, have recognized.”

“O, you are right!” said Miriam; “I never questioned it; though, as I told you, when she cast me off, it severed some few remaining bonds between me and decorous womanhood. But were there anything to forgive, I do forgive her. May you win her virgin heart; for methinks there can be few men in this evil world who are not more unworthy of her than yourself.”

