

The Marble Faun

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Chapter 33: Pictured Windows

After wide wanderings through the valley, the two travellers directed their course towards its boundary of hills. Here, the natural scenery and men's modifications of it immediately took a different aspect from that of the fertile and smiling plain. Not unfrequently there was a convent on the hillside; or, on some insulated promontory, a mined castle, once the den of a robber chieftain, who was accustomed to dash down from his commanding height upon the road that wound below. For ages back, the old fortress had been flinging down its crumbling ramparts, stone by stone, towards the grimy village at its foot.

Their road wound onward among the hills, which rose steep and lofty from the scanty level space that lay between them. They continually thrust their great bulks before the wayfarers, as if grimly resolute to forbid their passage, or closed abruptly behind them, when they still dared to proceed. A gigantic hill would set its foot right down before them, and only at the last moment would grudgingly withdraw it, just far enough to let them creep towards another obstacle. Adown these rough heights were visible the dry tracks of many a mountain torrent that had lived a life too fierce and passionate to be a long one. Or, perhaps, a stream was yet hurrying shyly along the edge of a far wider bed of pebbles and shelving rock than it seemed to need, though not too wide for the swollen rage of which this shy rivulet was capable. A stone bridge bestrode it, the ponderous arches of which were upheld and rendered indestructible by the weight of the very stones that threatened to crush them down. Old Roman toil was perceptible in the foundations of that massive bridge; the first weight that it ever bore was that of an army of the Republic.

Threading these defiles, they would arrive at some immemorial city, crowning the high summit of a hill with its cathedral, its many churches, and public edifices, all of Gothic architecture. With no more level ground than a single piazza in the midst, the ancient town tumbled its crooked and narrow streets down the mountainside, through arched passages and by steps of stone. The aspect of everything was awfully old; older, indeed, in its effect on the imagination than Rome itself, because history does not lay its finger on these forgotten



edifices and tell us all about their origin. Etruscan princes may have dwelt in them. A thousand years, at all events, would seem but a middle age for these structures. They are built of such huge, square stones, that their appearance of ponderous durability distresses the beholder with the idea that they can never fall,—never crumble away,—never be less fit than now for human habitation. Many of them may once have been palaces, and still retain a squalid grandeur. But, gazing at them, we recognize how undesirable it is to build the tabernacle of our brief lifetime out of permanent materials, and with a view to their being occupied by future generations.

All towns should be made capable of purification by fire, or of decay, within each half-century. Otherwise, they become the hereditary haunts of vermin and noisomeness, besides standing apart from the possibility of such improvements as are constantly introduced into the rest of man's contrivances and accommodations. It is beautiful, no doubt, and exceedingly satisfactory to some of our natural instincts, to imagine our far posterity dwelling under the same roof-tree as ourselves. Still, when people insist on building indestructible houses, they incur, or their children do, a misfortune analogous to that of the Sibyl, when she obtained the grievous boon of immortality. So we may build almost immortal habitations, it is true; but we cannot keep them from growing old, musty, unwholesome, dreary,—full of death scents, ghosts, and murder stains; in short, such habitations as one sees everywhere in Italy, be they hovels or palaces.

“You should go with me to my native country,” observed the sculptor to Donatello. “In that fortunate land, each generation has only its own sins and sorrows to bear. Here, it seems as if all the weary and dreary Past were piled upon the back of the Present. If I were to lose my spirits in this country,—if I were to suffer any heavy misfortune here,—methinks it would be impossible to stand up against it, under such adverse influences.”

“The sky itself is an old roof, now,” answered the Count; “and, no doubt, the sins of mankind have made it gloomier than it used to be.”

“O, my poor Faun,” thought Kenyon to himself, “how art thou changed!”

A city, like this of which we speak, seems a sort of stony growth out of the hillside, or a fossilized town; so ancient and strange it looks, without enough of life and juiciness in it to be any longer susceptible of decay. An earthquake would afford it the only chance of being ruined, beyond its present ruin.

Yet, though dead to all the purposes for which we live to-day, the place has its glorious recollections, and not merely rude and warlike ones, but those of brighter and milder triumphs, the fruits of which we still enjoy. Italy can count several of these lifeless towns



which, four or five hundred years ago, were each the birthplace of its own school of art; nor have they yet forgotten to be proud of the dark old pictures, and the faded frescos, the pristine beauty of which was a light and gladness to the world. But now, unless one happens to be a painter, these famous works make us miserably desperate. They are poor, dim ghosts of what, when Giotto or Cimabue first created them, threw a splendor along the stately aisles; so far gone towards nothingness, in our day, that scarcely a hint of design or expression can glimmer through the dusk. Those early artists did well to paint their frescos. Glowing on the church-walls, they might be looked upon as symbols of the living spirit that made Catholicism a true religion, and that glorified it as long as it retained a genuine life; they filled the transepts with a radiant throng of saints and angels, and threw around the high altar a faint reflection—as much as mortals could see, or bear—of a Diviner Presence. But now that the colors are so wretchedly bedimmed,—now that blotches of plastered wall dot the frescos all over, like a mean reality thrusting itself through life's brightest illusions,—the next best artist to Cimabue or Giotto or Ghirlandaio or Pinturicchio will be he that shall reverently cover their ruined masterpieces with whitewash!

Kenyon, however, being an earnest student and critic of Art, lingered long before these pathetic relics; and Donatello, in his present phase of penitence, thought no time spent amiss while he could be kneeling before an altar. Whenever they found a cathedral, therefore, or a Gothic church, the two travellers were of one mind to enter it. In some of these holy edifices they saw pictures that time had not dimmed nor injured in the least, though they perhaps belonged to as old a school of Art as any that were perishing around them. These were the painted windows; and as often as he gazed at them the sculptor blessed the medieval time, and its gorgeous contrivances of splendor; for surely the skill of man has never accomplished, nor his mind imagined, any other beauty or glory worthy to be compared with these.

It is the special excellence of pictured glass, that the light, which falls merely on the outside of other pictures, is here interfused throughout the work; it illuminates the design, and invests it with a living radiance; and in requital the unfading colors transmute the common daylight into a miracle of richness and glory in its passage through the heavenly substance of the blessed and angelic shapes which throng the high-arched window.

“It is a woeful thing,” cried Kenyon, while one of these frail yet enduring and fadeless pictures threw its hues on his face, and on the pavement of the church around him,—“a sad necessity that any Christian soul should pass from earth without once seeing an antique painted window, with the bright Italian sunshine glowing through it! There is no other such



true symbol of the glories of the better world, where a celestial radiance will be inherent in all things and persons, and render each continually transparent to the sight of all."

"But what a horror it would be," said Donatello sadly, "if there were a soul among them through which the light could not be transfused!"

"Yes; and perhaps this is to be the punishment of sin," replied the sculptor; "not that it shall be made evident to the universe, which can profit nothing by such knowledge, but that it shall insulate the sinner from all sweet society by rendering him impermeable to light, and, therefore, unrecognizable in the abode of heavenly simplicity and truth. Then, what remains for him, but the dreariness of infinite and eternal solitude?"

"That would be a horrible destiny, indeed!" said Donatello.

His voice as he spoke the words had a hollow and dreary cadence, as if he anticipated some such frozen solitude for himself. A figure in a dark robe was lurking in the obscurity of a side chapel close by, and made an impulsive movement forward, but hesitated as Donatello spoke again.

"But there might be a more miserable torture than to be solitary forever," said he. "Think of having a single companion in eternity, and instead of finding any consolation, or at all events variety of torture, to see your own weary, weary sin repeated in that inseparable soul."

"I think, my dear Count, you have never read Dante," observed Kenyon. "That idea is somewhat in his style, but I cannot help regretting that it came into your mind just then."

The dark-robed figure had shrunk back, and was quite lost to sight among the shadows of the chapel.

"There was an English poet," resumed Kenyon, turning again towards the window, "who speaks of the 'dim, religious light,' transmitted through painted glass. I always admired this richly descriptive phrase; but, though he was once in Italy, I question whether Milton ever saw any but the dingy pictures in the dusty windows of English cathedrals, imperfectly shown by the gray English daylight. He would else have illuminated that word 'dim' with some epithet that should not chase away the dimness, yet should make it glow like a million of rubies, sapphires, emeralds, and topazes. Is it not so with yonder window? The pictures are most brilliant in themselves, yet dim with tenderness and reverence, because God himself is shining through them."

"The pictures fill me with emotion, but not such as you seem to experience," said Donatello. "I tremble at those awful saints; and, most of all, at the figure above them. He glows with Divine wrath!"



“My dear friend,” said Kenyon, “how strangely your eyes have transmuted the expression of the figure! It is divine love, not wrath!”

“To my eyes,” said Donatello stubbornly, “it is wrath, not love! Each must interpret for himself.”

The friends left the church, and looking up, from the exterior, at the window which they had just been contemplating within, nothing; was visible but the merest outline of dusky shapes, Neither the individual likeness of saint, angel, nor Saviour, and far less the combined scheme and purport of the picture, could anywise be made out. That miracle of radiant art, thus viewed, was nothing better than an incomprehensible obscurity, without a gleam of beauty to induce the beholder to attempt unravelling it.

“All this,” thought the sculptor, “is a most forcible emblem of the different aspect of religious truth and sacred story, as viewed from the warm interior of belief, or from its cold and dreary outside. Christian faith is a grand cathedral, with divinely pictured windows. Standing without, you see no glory, nor can possibly imagine any; standing within, every ray of light reveals a harmony of unspeakable splendors.”

After Kenyon and Donatello emerged from the church, however, they had better opportunity for acts of charity and mercy than for religious contemplation; being immediately surrounded by a swarm of beggars, who are the present possessors of Italy, and share the spoil of the stranger with the fleas and mosquitoes, their formidable allies. These pests—the human ones—had hunted the two travellers at every stage of their journey. From village to village, ragged boys and girls kept almost under the horses’ feet; hoary grandsires and grandames caught glimpses of their approach, and hobbled to intercept them at some point of vantage; blind men stared them out of countenance with their sightless orbs; women held up their unwashed babies; cripples displayed their wooden legs, their grievous scars, their dangling, boneless arms, their broken backs, their burden of a hump, or whatever infirmity or deformity Providence had assigned them for an inheritance. On the highest mountain summit—in the most shadowy ravine—there was a beggar waiting for them. In one small village, Kenyon had the curiosity to count merely how many children were crying, whining, and bellowing all at once for alms. They proved to be more than forty of as ragged and dirty little imps as any in the world; besides whom, all the wrinkled matrons, and most of the village maids, and not a few stalwart men, held out their hands grimly, piteously, or smilingly in the forlorn hope of whatever trifle of coin might remain in pockets already so fearfully taxed. Had they been permitted, they would gladly have knelt down and worshipped the



travellers, and have cursed them, without rising from their knees, if the expected boon failed to be awarded.

Yet they were not so miserably poor but that the grown people kept houses over their heads.

In the way of food, they had, at least, vegetables in their little gardens, pigs and chickens to kill, eggs to fry into omelets with oil, wine to drink, and many other things to make life comfortable. As for the children, when no more small coin appeared to be forthcoming, they began to laugh and play, and turn heels over head, showing themselves jolly and vivacious brats, and evidently as well fed as needs be. The truth is, the Italian peasantry look upon strangers as the almoners of Providence, and therefore feel no more shame in asking and receiving alms, than in availing themselves of providential bounties in whatever other form.

In accordance with his nature, Donatello was always exceedingly charitable to these ragged battalions, and appeared to derive a certain consolation from the prayers which many of them put up in his behalf. In Italy a copper coin of minute value will often make all the difference between a vindictive curse—death by apoplexy being the favorite one—mumbled in an old witch's toothless jaws, and a prayer from the same lips, so earnest that it would seem to reward the charitable soul with at least a puff of grateful breath to help him heavenward. Good wishes being so cheap, though possibly not very efficacious, and anathemas so exceedingly bitter,—even if the greater portion of their poison remain in the mouth that utters them,—it may be wise to expend some reasonable amount in the purchase of the former. Donatello invariably did so; and as he distributed his alms under the pictured window, of which we have been speaking, no less than seven ancient women lifted their hands and besought blessings on his head.

“Come,” said the sculptor, rejoicing at the happier expression which he saw in his friend's face. “I think your steed will not stumble with you to-day. Each of these old dames looks as much like Horace's *Atra Cura* as can well be conceived; but, though there are seven of them, they will make your burden on horseback lighter instead of heavier.”

“Are we to ride far?” asked the Count.

“A tolerable journey betwixt now and to-morrow noon,” Kenyon replied; “for, at that hour, I purpose to be standing by the Pope's statue in the great square of Perugia.”

