

# The Marble Faun

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

## *Chapter 35: The Bronze Pontiff's Benediction*

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When the last of the twelve strokes had fallen from the cathedral clock, Kenyon threw his eyes over the busy scene of the market place, expecting to discern Miriam somewhere in the 'crowd. He looked next towards the cathedral itself, where it was reasonable to imagine that she might have taken shelter, while awaiting her appointed time. Seeing no trace of her in either direction, his eyes came back from their quest somewhat disappointed, and rested on a figure which was leaning, like Donatello and himself, on the iron balustrade that surrounded the statue. Only a moment before, they two had been alone.

It was the figure of a woman, with her head bowed on her hands, as if she deeply felt—what we have been endeavoring to convey into our feeble description—the benign and awe-inspiring influence which the pontiff's statue exercises upon a sensitive spectator. No matter though it were modelled for a Catholic chief priest, the desolate heart, whatever be its religion, recognizes in that image the likeness of a father.

“Miriam,” said the sculptor, with a tremor in his voice, “is it yourself?”

“It is I,” she replied; “I am faithful to my engagement, though with many fears.” She lifted her head, and revealed to Kenyon—revealed to Donatello likewise—the well-remembered features of Miriam. They were pale and worn, but distinguished even now, though less gorgeously, by a beauty that might be imagined bright enough to glimmer with its own light in a dim cathedral aisle, and had no need to shrink from the severer test of the mid-day sun. But she seemed tremulous, and hardly able to go through with a scene which at a distance she had found courage to undertake.

“You are most welcome, Miriam!” said the sculptor, seeking to afford her the encouragement which he saw she so greatly required. “I have a hopeful trust that the result of this interview will be propitious. Come; let me lead you to Donatello.”

“No, Kenyon, no!” whispered Miriam, shrinking back; “unless of his own accord he speaks my name,—unless he bids me stay,—no word shall ever pass between him and me. It



is not that I take upon me to be proud at this late hour. Among other feminine qualities, I threw away my pride when Hilda cast me off.”

“If not pride, what else restrains you?” Kenyon asked, a little angry at her unseasonable scruples, and also at this half-complaining reference to Hilda’s just severity. “After daring so much, it is no time for fear! If we let him part from you without a word, your opportunity of doing him inestimable good is lost forever.”

“True; it will be lost forever!” repeated Miriam sadly. “But, dear friend, will it be my fault? I willingly fling my woman’s pride at his feet. But—do you not see?—his heart must be left freely to its own decision whether to recognize me, because on his voluntary choice depends the whole question whether my devotion will do him good or harm. Except he feel an infinite need of me, I am a burden and fatal obstruction to him!”

“Take your own course, then, Miriam,” said Kenyon; “and, doubtless, the crisis being what it is, your spirit is better instructed for its emergencies than mine.”

While the foregoing words passed between them they had withdrawn a little from the immediate vicinity of the statue, so as to be out of Donatello’s hearing. Still, however, they were beneath the pontiff’s outstretched hand; and Miriam, with her beauty and her sorrow, looked up into his benignant face, as if she had come thither for his pardon and paternal affection, and despaired of so vast a boon.

Meanwhile, she had not stood thus long in the public square of Perugia, without attracting the observation of many eyes. With their quick sense of beauty, these Italians had recognized her loveliness, and spared not to take their fill of gazing at it; though their native gentleness and courtesy made their homage far less obtrusive than that of Germans, French, or Anglo-Saxons might have been. It is not improbable that Miriam had planned this momentous interview, on so public a spot and at high noon, with an eye to the sort of protection that would be thrown over it by a multitude of eye-witnesses. In circumstances of profound feeling and passion, there is often a sense that too great a seclusion cannot be endured; there is an indefinite dread of being quite alone with the object of our deepest interest. The species of solitude that a crowd harbors within itself is felt to be preferable, in certain conditions of the heart, to the remoteness of a desert or the depths of an untrodden wood. Hatred, love, or whatever kind of too intense emotion, or even indifference, where emotion has once been, instinctively seeks to interpose some barrier between itself and the corresponding passion in another breast. This, we suspect, was what Miriam had thought of, in coming to the thronged piazza; partly this, and partly, as she said, her superstition that the benign statue held good influences in store.



But Donatello remained leaning against the balustrade. She dared not glance towards him, to see whether he were pale and agitated, or calm as ice. Only, she knew that the moments were fleetly lapsing away, and that his heart must call her soon, or the voice would never reach her. She turned quite away from him and spoke again to the sculptor.

“I have wished to meet you,” said she, “for more than one reason. News has come to me respecting a dear friend of ours. Nay, not of mine! I dare not call her a friend of mine, though once the dearest.”

“Do you speak of Hilda?” exclaimed Kenyon, with quick alarm. “Has anything befallen her? When I last heard of her, she was still in Rome, and well.”

“Hilda remains in Rome,” replied Miriam, “nor is she ill as regards physical health, though much depressed in spirits. She lives quite alone in her dove-cote; not a friend near her, not one in Rome, which, you know, is deserted by all but its native inhabitants. I fear for her health, if she continue long in such solitude, with despondency preying on her mind. I tell you this, knowing the interest which the rare beauty of her character has awakened in you.”

“I will go to Rome!” said the sculptor, in great emotion. “Hilda has never allowed me to manifest more than a friendly regard; but, at least, she cannot prevent my watching over her at a humble distance. I will set out this very hour.”

“Do not leave us now!” whispered Miriam imploringly, and laying her hand on his arm. “One moment more! Ah; he has no word for me!”

“Miriam!” said Donatello.

Though but a single word, and the first that he had spoken, its tone was a warrant of the sad and tender depth from which it came. It told Miriam things of infinite importance, and, first of all, that he still loved her. The sense of their mutual crime had stunned, but not destroyed, the vitality of his affection; it was therefore indestructible. That tone, too, bespoke an altered and deepened character; it told of a vivified intellect, and of spiritual instruction that had come through sorrow and remorse; so that instead of the wild boy, the thing of sportive, animal nature, the sylvan Faun, here was now the man of feeling and intelligence.

She turned towards him, while his voice still reverberated in the depths of her soul.

“You have called me!” said she.

“Because my deepest heart has need of you!” he replied. “Forgive, Miriam, the coldness, the hardness with which I parted from you! I was bewildered with strange horror and gloom.”



“Alas! And it was I that brought it on you,” said she. “What repentance, what self-sacrifice, can atone for that infinite wrong? There was something so sacred in the innocent and joyous life which you were leading! A happy person is such an unaccustomed and holy creature in this sad world! And, encountering so rare a being, and gifted with the power of sympathy with his sunny life, it was my doom, mine, to bring him within the limits of sinful, sorrowful mortality! Bid me depart, Donatello! Fling me off! No good, through my agency, can follow upon such a mighty evil!”

“Miriam,” said he, “our lot lies together. Is it not so? Tell me, in Heaven’s name, if it be otherwise.”

Donatello’s conscience was evidently perplexed with doubt, whether the communion of a crime, such as they two were jointly stained with, ought not to stifle all the instinctive motions of their hearts, impelling them one towards the other. Miriam, on the other hand, remorsefully questioned with herself whether the misery, already accruing from her influence, should not warn her to withdraw from his path. In this momentous interview, therefore, two souls were groping for each other in the darkness of guilt and sorrow, and hardly were bold enough to grasp the cold hands that they found.

The sculptor stood watching the scene with earnest sympathy.

“It seems irreverent,” said he, at length; “intrusive, if not irreverent, for a third person to thrust himself between the two solely concerned in a crisis like the present. Yet, possibly as a bystander, though a deeply interested one, I may discern somewhat of truth that is hidden from you both; nay, at least interpret or suggest some ideas which you might not so readily convey to each other.”

“Speak!” said Miriam. “We confide in you.”

“Speak!” said Donatello. “You are true and upright.”

“I well know,” rejoined Kenyon, “that I shall not succeed in uttering the few, deep words which, in this matter, as in all others, include the absolute truth. But here, Miriam, is one whom a terrible misfortune has begun to educate; it has taken him, and through your agency, out of a wild and happy state, which, within circumscribed limits, gave him joys that he cannot elsewhere find on earth. On his behalf, you have incurred a responsibility which you cannot fling aside. And here, Donatello, is one whom Providence marks out as intimately connected with your destiny. The mysterious process, by which our earthly life instructs us for another state of being, was begun for you by her. She has rich gifts of heart and mind, a suggestive power, a magnetic influence, a sympathetic knowledge, which, wisely and religiously exercised, are what your condition needs. She possesses what you require,



and, with utter self devotion, will use it for your good. The bond betwixt you, therefore, is a true one, and never—except by Heaven’s own act—should be rent asunder.”

“Ah; he has spoken the truth!” cried Donatello, grasping Miriam’s hand.

“The very truth, dear friend,” cried Miriam.

“But take heed,” resumed the sculptor, anxious not to violate the integrity of his own conscience, “take heed; for you love one another, and yet your bond is twined with such black threads that you must never look upon it as identical with the ties that unite other loving souls. It is for mutual support; it is for one another’s final good; it is for effort, for sacrifice, but not for earthly happiness. If such be your motive, believe me, friends, it were better to relinquish each other’s hands at this sad moment. There would be no holy sanction on your wedded life.”

“None,” said Donatello, shuddering. “We know it well.”

“None,” repeated Miriam, also shuddering. “United—miserably entangled with me, rather—by a bond of guilt, our union might be for eternity, indeed, and most intimate;—but, through all that endless duration, I should be conscious of his horror.”

“Not for earthly bliss, therefore,” said Kenyon, “but for mutual elevation, and encouragement towards a severe and painful life, you take each other’s hands. And if, out of toil, sacrifice, prayer, penitence, and earnest effort towards right things, there comes at length a sombre and thoughtful, happiness, taste it, and thank Heaven! So that you live not for it,—so that it be a wayside flower, springing along a path that leads to higher ends,—it will be Heaven’s gracious gift, and a token that it recognizes your union here below.”

“Have you no more to say?” asked Miriam earnestly. “There is matter of sorrow and lofty consolation strangely mingled in your words.”

“Only this, dear Miriam,” said the sculptor; “if ever in your lives the highest duty should require from either of you the sacrifice of the other, meet the occasion without shrinking. This is all.”

While Kenyon spoke, Donatello had evidently taken in the ideas which he propounded, and had ennobled them by the sincerity of his reception. His aspect unconsciously assumed a dignity, which, elevating his former beauty, accorded with the change that had long been taking place in his interior self. He was a man, revolving grave and deep thoughts in his breast. He still held Miriam’s hand; and there they stood, the beautiful man, the beautiful woman, united forever, as they felt, in the presence of these thousand eye-witnesses, who gazed so curiously at the unintelligible scene. Doubtless the crowd recognized them as lovers, and fancied this a betrothal that was destined to result in lifelong happiness. And possibly it



might be so. Who can tell where happiness may come; or where, though an expected guest, it may never show its face? Perhaps—shy, subtle thing—it had crept into this sad marriage bond, when the partners would have trembled at its presence as a crime.

“Farewell!” said Kenyon; “I go to Rome.”

“Farewell, true friend!” said Miriam.

“Farewell!” said Donatello too. “May you be happy. You have no guilt to make you shrink from happiness.”

At this moment it so chanced that all the three friends by one impulse glanced upward at the statue of Pope Julius; and there was the majestic figure stretching out the hand of benediction over them, and bending down upon this guilty and repentant pair its visage of grand benignity. There is a singular effect oftentimes when, out of the midst of engrossing thought and deep absorption, we suddenly look up, and catch a glimpse of external objects. We seem at such moments to look farther and deeper into them, than by any premeditated observation; it is as if they met our eyes alive, and with all their hidden meaning on the surface, but grew again inanimate and inscrutable the instant that they became aware of our glances. So now, at that unexpected glimpse, Miriam, Donatello, and the sculptor, all three imagined that they beheld the bronze pontiff endowed with spiritual life. A blessing was felt descending upon them from his outstretched hand; he approved by look and gesture the pledge of a deep union that had passed under his auspices.

