

The Marble Faun

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Chapter 36: Hilda's Tower

When we have once known Rome, and left her where she lies, like a long-decaying corpse, retaining a trace of the noble shape it was, but with accumulated dust and a fungous growth overspreading all its more admirable features, left her in utter weariness, no doubt, of her narrow, crooked, intricate streets, so uncomfortably paved with little squares of lava that to tread over them is a penitential pilgrimage, so indescribably ugly, moreover, so cold, so alley-like, into which the sun never falls, and where a chill wind forces its deadly breath into our lungs,—left her, tired of the sight of those immense seven-storied, yellow-washed hovels, or call them palaces, where all that is dreary in domestic life seems magnified and multiplied, and weary of climbing those staircases, which ascend from a ground-floor of cook shops, cobblers' stalls, stables, and regiments of cavalry, to a middle region of princes, cardinals, and ambassadors, and an upper tier of artists, just beneath the unattainable sky,—left her, worn out with shivering at the cheerless and smoky fireside by day, and feasting with our own substance the ravenous little populace of a Roman bed at night,—left her, sick at heart of Italian trickery, which has uprooted whatever faith in man's integrity had endured till now, and sick at stomach of sour bread, sour wine, rancid butter, and bad cookery, needlessly bestowed on evil meats,—left her, disgusted with the pretence of holiness and the reality of nastiness, each equally omnipresent,—left her, half lifeless from the languid atmosphere, the vital principle of which has been used up long ago, or corrupted by myriads of slaughters,—left her, crushed down in spirit with the desolation of her ruin, and the hopelessness of her future,—left her, in short, hating her with all our might, and adding our individual curse to the infinite anathema which her old crimes have unmistakably brought down,—when we have left Rome in such mood as this, we are astonished by the discovery, by and by, that our heart-strings have mysteriously attached themselves to the Eternal City, and are drawing us thitherward again, as if it were more familiar, more intimately our home, than even the spot where we were born.



It is with a kindred sentiment, that we now follow the course of our story back through the Flaminian Gate, and, treading our way to the Via Portoghese, climb the staircase to the upper chamber of the tower where we last saw Hilda.

Hilda all along intended to pass the summer in Rome; for she had laid out many high and delightful tasks, which she could the better complete while her favorite haunts were deserted by the multitude that thronged them throughout the winter and early spring. Nor did she dread the summer atmosphere, although generally held to be so pestilential. She had already made trial of it, two years before, and found no worse effect than a kind of dreamy languor, which was dissipated by the first cool breezes that came with autumn. The thickly populated centre of the city, indeed, is never affected by the feverish influence that lies in wait in the Campagna, like a besieging foe, and nightly haunts those beautiful lawns and woodlands, around the suburban villas, just at the season when they most resemble Paradise. What the flaming sword was to the first Eden, such is the malaria to these sweet gardens and grove. We may wander through them, of an afternoon, it is true, but they cannot be made a home and a reality, and to sleep among them is death. They are but illusions, therefore, like the show of gleaming waters and shadowy foliage in a desert.

But Rome, within the walls, at this dreaded season, enjoys its festal days, and makes itself merry with characteristic and hereditary pas-times, for which its broad piazzas afford abundant room. It leads its own life with a freer spirit, now that the artists and foreign visitors are scattered abroad. No bloom, perhaps, would be visible in a cheek that should be unvisited, throughout the summer, by more invigorating winds than any within fifty miles of the city; no bloom, but yet, if the mind kept its healthy energy, a subdued and colorless well-being. There was consequently little risk in Hilda's purpose to pass the summer days in the galleries of Roman palaces, and her nights in that aerial chamber, whither the heavy breath of the city and its suburbs could not aspire. It would probably harm her no more than it did the white doves, who sought the same high atmosphere at sunset, and, when morning came, flew down into the narrow streets, about their daily business, as Hilda likewise did.

With the Virgin's aid and blessing, which might be hoped for even by a heretic, who so religiously lit the lamp before her shrine, the New England girl would sleep securely in her old Roman tower, and go forth on her pictorial pilgrimages without dread or peril. In view of such a summer, Hilda had anticipated many months of lonely, but unalloyed enjoyment. Not that she had a churlish disinclination to society, or needed to be told that we taste one intellectual pleasure twice, and with double the result, when we taste it with a friend. But,



keeping a maiden heart within her bosom, she rejoiced in the freedom that enabled her still to choose her own sphere, and dwell in it, if she pleased, without another inmate.

Her expectation, however, of a delightful summer was woefully disappointed. Even had she formed no previous plan of remaining there, it is improbable that Hilda would have gathered energy to stir from Rome. A torpor, heretofore unknown to her vivacious though quiet temperament, had possessed itself of the poor girl, like a half-dead serpent knotting its cold, inextricable wreaths about her limbs. It was that peculiar despair, that chill and heavy misery, which only the innocent can experience, although it possesses many of the gloomy characteristics that mark a sense of guilt. It was that heartsickness, which, it is to be hoped, we may all of us have been pure enough to feel, once in our lives, but the capacity for which is usually exhausted early, and perhaps with a single agony. It was that dismal certainty of the existence of evil in the world, which, though we may fancy ourselves fully assured of the sad mystery long before, never becomes a portion of our practical belief until it takes substance and reality from the sin of some guide, whom we have deeply trusted and revered, or some friend whom we have dearly loved.

When that knowledge comes, it is as if a cloud had suddenly gathered over the morning light; so dark a cloud, that there seems to be no longer any sunshine behind it or above it. The character of our individual beloved one having invested itself with all the attributes of right,—that one friend being to us the symbol and representative of whatever is good and true,—when he falls, the effect is almost as if the sky fell with him, bringing down in chaotic ruin the columns that upheld our faith. We struggle forth again, no doubt, bruised and bewildered. We stare wildly about us, and discover—or, it may be, we never make the discovery—that it was not actually the sky that has tumbled down, but merely a frail structure of our own rearing, which never rose higher than the housetops, and has fallen because we founded it on nothing. But the crash, and the affright and trouble, are as overwhelming, for the time, as if the catastrophe involved the whole moral world. Remembering these things, let them suggest one generous motive for walking heedfully amid the defilement of earthly ways! Let us reflect, that the highest path is pointed out by the pure Ideal of those who look up to us, and who, if we tread less loftily, may never look so high again.

Hilda's situation was made infinitely more wretched by the necessity of Confining all her trouble within her own consciousness. To this innocent girl, holding the knowledge of Miriam's crime within her tender and delicate soul, the effect was almost the same as if she herself had participated in the guilt. Indeed, partaking the human nature of those who could perpetrate such deeds, she felt her own spotlessness impugnant.



Had there been but a single friend,—or not a friend, since friends were no longer to be confided in, after Miriam had betrayed her trust,—but, had there been any calm, wise mind, any sympathizing intelligence; or, if not these, any dull, half-listening ear into which she might have flung the dreadful secret, as into an echoless cavern, what a relief would have ensued! But this awful loneliness! It enveloped her whithersoever she went. It was a shadow in the sunshine of festal days; a mist between her eyes and the pictures at which she strove to look; a chill dungeon, which kept her in its gray twilight and fed her with its unwholesome air, fit only for a criminal to breathe and pine in! She could not escape from it. In the effort to do so, straying farther into the intricate passages of our nature, she stumbled, ever and again, over this deadly idea of mortal guilt.

Poor sufferer for another's sin! Poor wellspring of a virgin's heart, into which a murdered corpse had casually fallen, and whence it could not be drawn forth again, but lay there, day after day, night after night, tainting its sweet atmosphere with the scent of crime and ugly death!

The strange sorrow that had befallen Hilda did not fail to impress its mysterious seal upon her face, and to make itself perceptible to sensitive observers in her manner and carriage. A young Italian artist, who frequented the same galleries which Hilda haunted, grew deeply interested in her expression. One day, while she stood before Leonardo da Vinci's picture of Joanna of Aragon, but evidently without seeing it,—for, though it had attracted her eyes, a fancied resemblance to Miriam had immediately drawn away her thoughts,—this artist drew a hasty sketch which he afterwards elaborated into a finished portrait. It represented Hilda as gazing with sad and earnest horror at a bloodspot which she seemed just then to have discovered on her white robe. The picture attracted considerable notice. Copies of an engraving from it may still be found in the print shops along the Corso. By many connoisseurs, the idea of the face was supposed to have been suggested by the portrait of Beatrice Cenci; and, in fact, there was a look somewhat similar to poor Beatrice's forlorn gaze out of the dreary isolation and remoteness, in which a terrible doom had involved a tender soul. But the modern artist strenuously upheld the originality of his own picture, as well as the stainless purity its subject, and chose to call it—and was laughed at for his pains—“Innocence, dying of a Blood-stain!”

“Your picture, Signore Panini, does you credit,” remarked the picture dealer, who had bought it of the young man for fifteen scudi, and afterwards sold it for ten times the sum; “but it would be worth a better price if you had given it a more intelligible title. Looking at the face and expression of this fair signorina, we seem to comprehend readily enough, that



she is undergoing one or another of those troubles of the heart to which young ladies are but too liable. But what is this blood-stain? And what has innocence to do with it? Has she stabbed her perfidious lover with a bodkin?"

"She! She commit a crime!" cried the young artist. "Can you look at the innocent anguish in her face, and ask that question? No; but, as I read the mystery, a man has been slain in her presence, and the blood, spurting accidentally on her white robe, has made a stain which eats into her life."

"Then, in the name of her patron saint," exclaimed the picture dealer, "why don't she get the robe made white again at the expense of a few baiocchi to her washerwoman? No, no, my dear Panini. The picture being now my property, I shall call it 'The Signorina's Vengeance.' She has stabbed her lover overnight, and is repenting it betimes the next morning. So interpreted, the picture becomes an intelligible and very natural representation of a not uncommon fact."

Thus coarsely does the world translate all finer griefs that meet its eye. It is more a coarse world than an unkind one.

But Hilda sought nothing either from the world's delicacy or its pity, and never dreamed of its misinterpretations. Her doves often flew in through the windows of the tower, winged messengers, bringing her what sympathy they could, and uttering soft, tender, and complaining sounds, deep in their bosoms, which soothed the girl more than a distincter utterance might. And sometimes Hilda moaned quietly among the doves, teaching her voice to accord with theirs, and thus finding a temporary relief from the burden of her incommunicable sorrow, as if a little portion of it, at least, had been told to these innocent friends, and been understood and pitied.

When she trimmed the lamp before the Virgin's shrine, Hilda gazed at the sacred image, and, rude as was the workmanship, beheld, or fancied, expressed with the quaint, powerful simplicity which sculptors sometimes had five hundred years ago, a woman's tenderness responding to her gaze. If she knelt, if she prayed, if her oppressed heart besought the sympathy of divine womanhood afar in bliss, but not remote, because forever humanized by the memory of mortal griefs, was Hilda to be blamed? It was not a Catholic kneeling at an idolatrous shrine, but a child lifting its tear-stained face to seek comfort from a mother.

