

The Marble Faun

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Chapter 39: The World's Cathedral

Still gliding onward, Hilda now looked up into the dome, where the sunshine came through the western windows, and threw across long shafts of light. They rested upon the mosaic figures of two evangelists above the cornice. These great beams of radiance, traversing what seemed the empty space, were made visible in misty glory, by the holy cloud of incense, else unseen, which had risen into the middle dome. It was to Hilda as if she beheld the worship of the priest and people ascending heavenward, purified from its alloy of earth, and acquiring celestial substance in the golden atmosphere to which it aspired, She wondered if angels did not sometimes hover within the dome, and show themselves, in brief glimpses, floating amid the sunshine and the glorified vapor, to those who devoutly worshipped on the pavement.

She had now come into the southern transept. Around this portion of the church are ranged a number of confessionals. They are small tabernacles of carved wood, with a closet for the priest in the centre; and, on either side, a space for a penitent to kneel, and breathe his confession through a perforated auricle into the good father's ear. Observing this arrangement, though already familiar to her, our poor Hilda was anew impressed with the infinite convenience—if we may use so poor a phrase—of the Catholic religion to its devout believers.

Who, in truth, that considers the matter, can resist a similar impression! In the hottest fever-fit of life, they can always find, ready for their need, a cool, quiet, beautiful place of worship. They may enter its sacred precincts at any hour, leaving the fret and trouble of the world behind them, and purifying themselves with a touch of holy water at the threshold. In the calm interior, fragrant of rich and soothing incense, they may hold converse with some saint, their awful, kindly friend. And, most precious privilege of all, whatever perplexity, sorrow, guilt, may weigh upon their souls, they can fling down the dark burden at the foot of the cross, and go forth—to sin no more, nor be any longer disquieted; but to live again in the freshness and elasticity of innocence.



“Do not these inestimable advantages,” thought Hilda, “or some of them at least, belong to Christianity itself? Are they not a part of the blessings which the system was meant to bestow upon mankind? Can the faith in which I was born and bred be perfect, if it leave a weak girl like me to wander, desolate, with this great trouble crushing me down?”

A poignant anguish thrilled within her breast; it was like a thing that had life, and was struggling to get out.

“O help! O help!” cried Hilda; “I cannot, cannot bear it!”

Only by the reverberations that followed—arch echoing the sound to arch, and a pope of bronze repeating it to a pope of marble, as each sat enthroned over his tomb—did Hilda become aware that she had really spoken above her breath. But, in that great space, there is no need to hush up the heart within one’s own bosom, so carefully as elsewhere; and if the cry reached any distant auditor, it came broken into many fragments, and from various quarters of the church.

Approaching one of the confessionals, she saw a woman kneeling within. Just as Hilda drew near, the penitent rose, came forth, and kissed the hand of the priest, who regarded her with a look of paternal benignity, and appeared to be giving her some spiritual counsel, in a low voice. She then knelt to receive his blessing, which was fervently bestowed. Hilda was so struck with the peace and joy in the woman’s face, that, as the latter retired, she could not help speaking to her.

“You look very happy!” said she. “Is it so sweet, then, to go to the confessional?”

“O, very sweet, my dear signorina!” answered the woman, with moistened eyes and an affectionate smile; for she was so thoroughly softened with what she had been doing, that she felt as if Hilda were her younger sister. “My heart is at rest now. Thanks be to the Saviour, and the Blessed Virgin and the saints, and this good father, there is no more trouble for poor Teresa!”

“I am glad for your sake,” said Hilda, sighing for her own. “I am a poor heretic, but a human sister; and I rejoice for you!”

She went from one to another of the confessionals, and, looking at each, perceived that they were inscribed with gilt letters: on one, *Pro Italica Lingua*; on another, *Pro Flandrica Lingua*; on a third, *Pro Polonica Lingua*; on a fourth, *Pro Illyrica Lingua*; on a fifth, *Pro Hispanica Lingua*. In this vast and hospitable cathedral, worthy to be the religious heart of the whole world, there was room for all nations; there was access to the Divine Grace for every Christian soul; there was an ear for what the overburdened heart might have to murmur, speak in what native tongue it would.



When Hilda had almost completed the circuit of the transept, she came to a confessional—the central part was closed, but a mystic room protruded from it, indicating the presence of a priest within—on which was inscribed, *Pro Anglica Lingua*.

It was the word in season! If she had heard her mother's voice from within the tabernacle, calling her, in her own mother-tongue, to come and lay her poor head in her lap, and sob out all her troubles, Hilda could not have responded with a more inevitable obedience. She did not think; she only felt. Within her heart was a great need. Close at hand, within the veil of the confessional, was the relief. She flung herself down in the penitent's place; and, tremulously, passionately, with sobs, tears, and the turbulent overflow of emotion too long repressed, she poured out the dark story which had infused its poison into her innocent life.

Hilda had not seen, nor could she now see, the visage of the priest. But, at intervals, in the pauses of that strange confession, half choked by the struggle of her feelings toward an outlet, she heard a mild, calm voice, somewhat mellowed by age. It spoke soothingly; it encouraged her; it led her on by apposite questions that seemed to be suggested by a great and tender interest, and acted like magnetism in attracting the girl's confidence to this unseen friend. The priest's share in the interview, indeed, resembled that of one who removes the stones, clustered branches, or whatever entanglements impede the current of a swollen stream. Hilda could have imagined—so much to the purpose were his inquiries—that he was already acquainted with some outline of what she strove to tell him.

Thus assisted, she revealed the whole of her terrible secret! The whole, except that no name escaped her lips.

And, ah, what a relief! When the hysteric gasp, the strife between words and sobs, had subsided, what a torture had passed away from her soul! It was all gone; her bosom was as pure now as in her childhood. She was a girl again; she was Hilda of the dove-cote; not that doubtful creature whom her own doves had hardly recognized as their mistress and playmate, by reason of the death-scent that clung to her garments!

After she had ceased to speak, Hilda heard the priest bestir himself with an old man's reluctant movement. He stepped out of the confessional; and as the girl was still kneeling in the penitential corner, he summoned her forth.

"Stand up, my daughter," said the mild voice of the confessor; "what we have further to say must be spoken face to face."

Hilda did his bidding, and stood before him with a downcast visage, which flushed and grew pale again. But it had the wonderful beauty which we may often observe in those



who have recently gone through a great struggle, and won the peace that lies just on the other side. We see it in a new mother's face; we see it in the faces of the dead; and in Hilda's countenance—which had always a rare natural charm for her friends—this glory of peace made her as lovely as an angel.

On her part, Hilda beheld a venerable figure with hair as white as snow, and a face strikingly characterized by benevolence. It bore marks of thought, however, and penetrative insight; although the keen glances of the eyes were now somewhat bedimmed with tears, which the aged shed, or almost shed, on lighter stress of emotion than would elicit them from younger men.

“It has not escaped my observation, daughter,” said the priest, “that this is your first acquaintance with the confessional. How is this?”

“Father,” replied Hilda, raising her eyes, and again letting them fall, “I am of New England birth, and was bred as what you call a heretic.”

“From New England!” exclaimed the priest. “It was my own birthplace, likewise; nor have fifty years of absence made me cease to love it. But a heretic! And are you reconciled to the Church?”

“Never, father,” said Hilda.

“And, that being the case,” demanded the old man, “on what ground, my daughter, have you sought to avail yourself of these blessed privileges, confined exclusively to members of the one true Church, of confession and absolution?”

“Absolution, father?” exclaimed Hilda, shrinking back. “O no, no! I never dreamed of that! Only our Heavenly Father can forgive my sins; and it is only by sincere repentance of whatever wrong I may have done, and by my own best efforts towards a higher life, that I can hope for his forgiveness! God forbid that I should ask absolution from mortal man!”

“Then wherefore,” rejoined the priest, with somewhat less mildness in his tone,—“wherefore, I ask again, have you taken possession, as I may term it, of this holy ordinance; being a heretic, and neither seeking to share, nor having faith in, the unspeakable advantages which the Church offers to its penitents?”

“Father,” answered Hilda, trying to tell the old man the simple truth, “I am a motherless girl, and a stranger here in Italy. I had only God to take care of me, and be my closest friend; and the terrible, terrible crime, which I have revealed to you, thrust itself between him and me; so that I groped for him in the darkness, as it were, and found him not,—found nothing but a dreadful solitude, and this crime in the midst of it! I could not bear it. It seemed as if



I made the awful guilt my own, by keeping it hidden in my heart. I grew a fearful thing to myself. I was going mad!”

“It was a grievous trial, my poor child!” observed the confessor. “Your relief, I trust, will prove to be greater than you yet know!”

“I feel already how immense it is!” said Hilda, looking gratefully in his face. “Surely, father, it was the hand of Providence that led me hither, and made me feel that this vast temple of Christianity, this great home of religion, must needs contain some cure, some ease, at least, for my unutterable anguish. And it has proved so. I have told the hideous secret; told it under the sacred seal of the confessional; and now it will burn my poor heart no more!”

“But, daughter,” answered the venerable priest, not unmoved by what Hilda said, “you forget! you mistake!—you claim a privilege to which you have not entitled yourself! The seal of the confessional, do you say? God forbid that it should ever be broken where it has been fairly impressed; but it applies only to matters that have been confided to its keeping in a certain prescribed method, and by persons, moreover, who have faith in the sanctity of the ordinance. I hold myself, and any learned casuist of the Church would hold me, as free to disclose all the particulars of what you term your confession, as if they had come to my knowledge in a secular way.”

“This is not right, father!” said Hilda, fixing her eyes on the old man’s.

“Do not you see, child,” he rejoined, with some little heat, “with all your nicety of conscience, cannot you recognize it as my duty to make the story known to the proper authorities; a great crime against public justice being involved, and further evil consequences likely to ensue?”

“No, father, no!” answered Hilda, courageously, her cheeks flushing and her eyes brightening as she spoke. “Trust a girl’s simple heart sooner than any casuist of your Church, however learned he may be. Trust your own heart, too! I came to your confessional, father, as I devoutly believe, by the direct impulse of Heaven, which also brought you hither to-day, in its mercy and love, to relieve me of a torture that I could no longer bear. I trusted in the pledge which your Church has always held sacred between the priest and the human soul, which, through his medium, is struggling towards its Father above. What I have confided to you lies sacredly between God and yourself. Let it rest there, father; for this is right, and if you do otherwise, you will perpetrate a great wrong, both as a priest and a man! And believe me, no question, no torture, shall ever force my lips to utter what would be necessary, in order to make my confession available towards the punishment of the guilty ones. Leave Providence to deal with them!”



“My quiet little countrywoman,” said the priest, with half a smile on his kindly old face, “you can pluck up a spirit, I perceive, when you fancy an occasion for one.”

“I have spirit only to do what I think right,” replied Hilda simply. “In other respects I am timorous.”

“But you confuse yourself between right feelings and very foolish inferences,” continued the priest, “as is the wont of women,—so much I have learnt by long experience in the confessional,—be they young or old. However, to set your heart at rest, there is no probable need for me to reveal the matter. What you have told, if I mistake not, and perhaps more, is already known in the quarter which it most concerns.”

“Known!” exclaimed Hilda. “Known to the authorities of Rome! And what will be the consequence?”

“Hush!” answered the confessor, laying his finger on his lips. “I tell you my supposition—mind, it is no assertion of the fact—in order that you may go the more cheerfully on your way, not deeming yourself burdened with any responsibility as concerns this dark deed. And now, daughter, what have you to give in return for an old man’s kindness and sympathy?”

“My grateful remembrance,” said Hilda, fervently, “as long as I live!”

“And nothing more?” the priest inquired, with a persuasive smile. “Will you not reward him with a great joy; one of the last joys that he may know on earth, and a fit one to take with him into the better world? In a word, will you not allow me to bring you as a stray lamb into the true fold? You have experienced some little taste of the relief and comfort which the Church keeps abundantly in store for all its faithful children. Come home, dear child,—poor wanderer, who hast caught a glimpse of the heavenly light,—come home, and be at rest.”

“Father,” said Hilda, much moved by his kindly earnestness, in which, however, genuine as it was, there might still be a leaven of professional craft, “I dare not come a step farther than Providence shall guide me. Do not let it grieve you, therefore, if I never return to the confessional; never dip my fingers in holy water; never sign my bosom with the cross. I am a daughter of the Puritans. But, in spite of my heresy,” she added with a sweet, tearful smile, “you may one day see the poor girl, to whom you have done this great Christian kindness, coming to remind you of it, and thank you for it, in the Better Land.”

The old priest shook his head. But, as he stretched out his hands at the same moment, in the act of benediction, Hilda knelt down and received the blessing with as devout a simplicity as any Catholic of them all.

