

The Marble Faun

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Chapter 47: The Peasant and Contadina

They descended into the excavation: a young peasant, in the short blue jacket, the small-clothes buttoned at the knee, and buckled shoes, that compose one of the ugliest dresses ever worn by man, except the wearer's form have a grace which any garb, or the nudity of an antique statue, would equally set off; and, hand in hand with him, a village girl, in one of those brilliant costumes largely kindled up with scarlet, and decorated with gold embroidery, in which the contadinas array themselves on feast-days. But Kenyon was not deceived; he had recognized the voices of his friends, indeed, even before their disguised figures came between him and the sunlight. Donatello was the peasant; the contadina, with the airy smile, half mirthful, though it shone out of melancholy eyes,—was Miriam.

They both greeted the sculptor with a familiar kindness which reminded him of the days when Hilda and they and he had lived so happily together, before the mysterious adventure of the catacomb. What a succession of sinister events had followed one spectral figure out of that gloomy labyrinth.

“It is carnival time, you know,” said Miriam, as if in explanation of Donatello's and her own costume. “Do you remember how merrily we spent the Carnival, last year?”

“It seems many years ago,” replied Kenyon. “We are all so changed!”

When individuals approach one another with deep purposes on both sides, they seldom come at once to the matter which they have most at heart. They dread the electric shock of a too sudden contact with it. A natural impulse leads them to steal gradually onward, hiding themselves, as it were, behind a closer, and still a closer topic, until they stand face to face with the true point of interest. Miriam was conscious of this impulse, and partially obeyed it.

“So your instincts as a sculptor have brought you into the presence of our newly discovered statue,” she observed. “Is it not beautiful? A far truer image of immortal womanhood than the poor little damsel at Florence, world famous though she be.”



“Most beautiful,” said Kenyon, casting an indifferent glance at the Venus. “The time has been when the sight of this statue would have been enough to make the day memorable.”

“And will it not do so now?” Miriam asked.

“I fancied so, indeed, when we discovered it two days ago. It is Donatello’s prize. We were sitting here together, planning an interview with you, when his keen eyes detected the fallen goddess, almost entirely buried under that heap of earth, which the clumsy excavators showered down upon her, I suppose. We congratulated ourselves, chiefly for your sake. The eyes of us three are the only ones to which she has yet revealed herself. Does it not frighten you a little, like the apparition of a lovely woman that livid of old, and has long lain in the grave?”

“Ah, Miriam! I cannot respond to you,” said the sculptor, with irrepressible impatience. “Imagination and the love of art have both died out of me.”

“Miriam,” interposed Donatello with gentle gravity, “why should we keep our friend in suspense? We know what anxiety he feels. Let us give him what intelligence we can.”

“You are so direct and immediate, my beloved friend!” answered Miriam with an unquiet smile. “There are several reasons why I should like to play round this matter a little while, and cover it with fanciful thoughts, as we strew a grave with flowers.”

“A grave!” exclaimed the sculptor.

“No grave in which your heart need be buried,” she replied; “you have no such calamity to dread. But I linger and hesitate, because every word I speak brings me nearer to a crisis from which I shrink. Ah, Donatello! let us live a little longer the life of these last few days! It is so bright, so airy, so childlike, so without either past or future! Here, on the wild Campagna, you seem to have found, both for yourself and me, the life that belonged to you in early youth; the sweet irresponsible life which you inherited from your mythic ancestry, the Fauns of Monte Beni. Our stern and black reality will come upon us speedily enough. But, first, a brief time more of this strange happiness.”

“I dare not linger upon it,” answered Donatello, with an expression that reminded the sculptor of the gloomiest days of his remorse at Monte Beni. “I dare to be so happy as you have seen me, only because I have felt the time to be so brief.”

“One day, then!” pleaded Miriam. “One more day in the wild freedom of this sweet-scented air.”

“Well, one more day,” said Donatello, smiling; and his smile touched Kenyon with a pathos beyond words, there being gayety and sadness both melted into it; “but here is Hilda’s



friend, and our own. Comfort him, at least, and set his heart at rest, since you have it partly in your power.”

“Ah, surely he might endure his pangs a little longer!” cried Miriam, turning to Kenyon with a tricksy, fitful kind of mirth, that served to hide some solemn necessity, too sad and serious to be looked at in its naked aspect. “You love us both, I think, and will be content to suffer for our sakes, one other day. Do I ask too much?”

“Tell me of Hilda,” replied the sculptor; “tell me only that she is safe, and keep back what else you will.”

“Hilda is safe,” said Miriam. “There is a Providence purposely for Hilda, as I remember to have told you long ago. But a great trouble—an evil deed, let us acknowledge it has spread out its dark branches so widely, that the shadow falls on innocence as well as guilt. There was one slight link that connected your sweet Hilda with a crime which it was her unhappy fortune to witness, but of which I need not say she was as guiltless as the angels that looked out of heaven, and saw it too. No matter, now, what the consequence has been. You shall have your lost Hilda back, and—who knows?—perhaps tenderer than she was.”

“But when will she return?” persisted the sculptor; “tell me the when, and where, and how!”

“A little patience. Do not press me so,” said Miriam; and again Kenyon was struck by the sprite-like, fitful characteristic of her manner, and a sort of hysteric gayety, which seemed to be a will-o’-the-wisp from a sorrow stagnant at her heart. “You have more time to spare than I. First, listen to something that I have to tell. We will talk of Hilda by and by.”

Then Miriam spoke of her own life, and told facts that threw a gleam of light over many things which had perplexed the sculptor in all his previous knowledge of her. She described herself as springing from English parentage, on the mother’s side, but with a vein, likewise, of Jewish blood; yet connected, through her father, with one of those few princely families of Southern Italy, which still retain great wealth and influence. And she revealed a name at which her auditor started and grew pale; for it was one that, only a few years before, had been familiar to the world in connection with a mysterious and terrible event. The reader, if he think it worth while to recall some of the strange incidents which have been talked of, and forgotten, within no long time past, will remember Miriam’s name.

“You shudder at me, I perceive,” said Miriam, suddenly interrupting her narrative.

“No; you were innocent,” replied the sculptor. “I shudder at the fatality that seems to haunt your footsteps, and throws a shadow of crime about your path, you being guiltless.”



“There was such a fatality,” said Miriam; “yes; the shadow fell upon me, innocent, but I went astray in it, and wandered—as Hilda could tell you—into crime.”

She went on to say that, while yet a child, she had lost her English mother. From a very early period of her life, there had been a contract of betrothal between herself and a certain marchese, the representative of another branch of her paternal house,—a family arrangement between two persons of disproportioned ages, and in which feeling went for nothing. Most Italian girls of noble rank would have yielded themselves to such a marriage as an affair of course. But there was something in Miriam’s blood, in her mixed race, in her recollections of her mother,—some characteristic, finally, in her own nature,—which had given her freedom of thought, and force of will, and made this prearranged connection odious to her. Moreover, the character of her destined husband would have been a sufficient and insuperable objection; for it betrayed traits so evil, so treacherous, so vile, and yet so strangely subtle, as could only be accounted for by the insanity which often develops itself in old, close-kept races of men, when long unmixed with newer blood. Reaching the age when the marriage contract should have been fulfilled, Miriam had utterly repudiated it.

Some time afterwards had occurred that terrible event to which Miriam had alluded when she revealed her name; an event, the frightful and mysterious circumstances of which will recur to many minds, but of which few or none can have found for themselves a satisfactory explanation. It only concerns the present narrative, inasmuch as the suspicion of being at least an accomplice in the crime fell darkly and directly upon Miriam herself.

“But you know that I am innocent!” she cried, interrupting herself again, and looking Kenyon in the face.

“I know it by my deepest consciousness,” he answered; “and I know it by Hilda’s trust and entire affection, which you never could have won had you been capable of guilt.”

“That is sure ground, indeed, for pronouncing me innocent,” said Miriam, with the tears gushing into her eyes. “Yet I have since become a horror to your saint-like Hilda, by a crime which she herself saw me help to perpetrate!”

She proceeded with her story. The great influence of her family connections had shielded her from some of the consequences of her imputed guilt. But, in her despair, she had fled from home, and had surrounded her flight with such circumstances as rendered it the most probable conclusion that she had committed suicide. Miriam, however, was not of the feeble nature which takes advantage of that obvious and poor resource in earthly difficulties. She flung herself upon the world, and speedily created a new sphere, in which Hilda’s gentle purity, the sculptor’s sensibility, clear thought, and genius, and Donatello’s genial simplicity



had given her almost her first experience of happiness. Then came that ill-omened adventure of the catacomb, The spectral figure which she encountered there was the evil fate that had haunted her through life.

Looking back upon what had happened, Miriam observed, she now considered him a madman. Insanity must have been mixed up with his original composition, and developed by those very acts of depravity which it suggested, and still more intensified, by the remorse that ultimately followed them. Nothing was stranger in his dark career than the penitence which often seemed to go hand in hand with crime. Since his death she had ascertained that it finally led him to a convent, where his severe and self-inflicted penance had even acquired him the reputation of unusual sanctity, and had been the cause of his enjoying greater freedom than is commonly allowed to monks.

“Need I tell you more?” asked Miriam, after proceeding thus far. “It is still a dim and dreary mystery, a gloomy twilight into which I guide you; but possibly you may catch a glimpse of much that I myself can explain only by conjecture. At all events, you can comprehend what my situation must have been, after that fatal interview in the catacomb. My persecutor had gone thither for penance, but followed me forth with fresh impulses to crime. He had me in his power. Mad as he was, and wicked as he was, with one word he could have blasted me in the belief of all the world. In your belief too, and Hilda’s! Even Donatello would have shrunk from me with horror!”

“Never,” said Donatello, “my instinct would have known you innocent.”

“Hilda and Donatello and myself,—we three would have acquitted you,” said Kenyon, “let the world say what it might. Ah, Miriam, you should have told us this sad story sooner!”

“I thought often of revealing it to you,” answered Miriam; “on one occasion, especially,—it was after you had shown me your Cleopatra; it seemed to leap out of my heart, and got as far as my very lips. But finding you cold to accept my confidence, I thrust it back again. Had I obeyed my first impulse, all would have turned out differently.”

“And Hilda!” resumed the sculptor. “What can have been her connection with these dark incidents?”

“She will, doubtless, tell you with her own lips,” replied Miriam. “Through sources of information which I possess in Rome, I can assure you of her safety. In two days more—by the help of the special Providence that, as I love to tell you, watches over Hilda—she shall rejoin you.”

“Still two days more!” murmured the sculptor.



“Ah, you are cruel now! More cruel than you know!” exclaimed Miriam, with another gleam of that fantastic, fitful gayety, which had more than once marked her manner during this interview. “Spare your poor friends!”

“I know not what you mean, Miriam,” said Kenyon.

“No matter,” she replied; “you will understand hereafter. But could you think it? Here is Donatello haunted with strange remorse, and an unmitigable resolve to obtain what he deems justice upon himself. He fancies, with a kind of direct simplicity, which I have vainly tried to combat, that, when a wrong has been done, the doer is bound to submit himself to whatsoever tribunal takes cognizance of such things, and abide its judgment. I have assured him that there is no such thing as earthly justice, and especially none here, under the head of Christendom.”

“We will not argue the point again,” said Donatello, smiling. “I have no head for argument, but only a sense, an impulse, an instinct, I believe, which sometimes leads me right. But why do we talk now of what may make us sorrowful? There are still two days more. Let us be happy!”

It appeared to Kenyon that since he last saw Donatello, some of the sweet and delightful characteristics of the antique Faun had returned to him. There were slight, careless graces, pleasant and simple peculiarities, that had been obliterated by the heavy grief through which he was passing at Monte Beni, and out of which he had hardly emerged when the sculptor parted with Miriam and him beneath the bronze pontiffs outstretched hand. These happy blossoms had now reappeared. A playfulness came out of his heart, and glimmered like firelight in his actions, alternating, or even closely intermingled, with profound sympathy and serious thought.

“Is he not beautiful?” said Miriam, watching the sculptor’s eye as it dwelt admiringly on Donatello. “So changed, yet still, in a deeper sense, so much the same! He has travelled in a circle, as all things heavenly and earthly do, and now comes back to his original self, with an inestimable treasure of improvement won from an experience of pain. How wonderful is this! I tremble at my own thoughts, yet must needs probe them to their depths. Was the crime—in which he and I were wedded—was it a blessing, in that strange disguise? Was it a means of education, bringing a simple and imperfect nature to a point of feeling and intelligence which it could have reached under no other discipline?”

“You stir up deep and perilous matter, Miriam,” replied Kenyon. “I dare not follow you into the unfathomable abysses whither you are tending.”



“Yet there is a pleasure in them! I delight to brood on the verge of this great mystery,” returned she. “The story of the fall of man! Is it not repeated in our romance of Monte Beni? And may we follow the analogy yet further? Was that very sin,—into which Adam precipitated himself and all his race, was it the destined means by which, over a long pathway of toil and sorrow, we are to attain a higher, brighter, and profounder happiness, than our lost birthright gave? Will not this idea account for the permitted existence of sin, as no other theory can?”

“It is too dangerous, Miriam! I cannot follow you!” repeated the sculptor. “Mortal man has no right to tread on the ground where you now set your feet.”

“Ask Hilda what she thinks of it,” said Miriam, with a thoughtful smile. “At least, she might conclude that sin—which man chose instead of good—has been so beneficently handled by omniscience and omnipotence, that, whereas our dark enemy sought to destroy us by it, it has really become an instrument most effective in the education of intellect and soul.”

Miriam paused a little longer among these meditations, which the sculptor rightly felt to be so perilous; she then pressed his hand, in token of farewell.

“The day after to-morrow,” said she, “an hour before sunset, go to the Corso, and stand in front of the fifth house on your left, beyond the Antonine column. You will learn tidings of a friend.”

Kenyon would have besought her for more definite intelligence, but she shook her head, put her finger on her lips, and turned away with an illusive smile. The fancy impressed him that she too, like Donatello, had reached a wayside paradise, in their mysterious life journey, where they both threw down the burden of the before and after, and, except for this interview with himself, were happy in the flitting moment. To-day Donatello was the sylvan Faun; to-day Miriam was his fit companion, a Nymph of grove or fountain; to-morrow—a remorseful man and woman, linked by a marriage bond of crime—they would set forth towards an inevitable goal.

