

The Marble Faun

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Chapter 48: A Scene in the Corso

On the appointed afternoon, Kenyon failed not to make his appearance in the Corso, and at an hour much earlier than Miriam had named.

It was carnival time. The merriment of this famous festival was in full progress; and the stately avenue of the Corso was peopled with hundreds of fantastic shapes, some of which probably represented the mirth of ancient times, surviving through all manner of calamity, ever since the days of the Roman Empire. For a few afternoons of early spring, this mouldy gayety strays into the sunshine; all the remainder of the year, it seems to be shut up in the catacombs or some other sepulchral storehouse of the past.

Besides these hereditary forms, at which a hundred generations have laughed, there were others of modern date, the humorous effluence of the day that was now passing. It is a day, however, and an age, that appears to be remarkably barren, when compared with the prolific originality of former times, in productions of a scenic and ceremonial character, whether grave or gay. To own the truth, the Carnival is alive, this present year, only because it has existed through centuries gone by. It is traditionary, not actual. If decrepit and melancholy Rome smiles, and laughs broadly, indeed, at carnival time, it is not in the old simplicity of real mirth, but with a half-conscious effort, like our self-deceptive pretence of jollity at a threadbare joke. Whatever it may once have been, it is now but a narrow stream of merriment, noisy of set purpose, running along the middle of the Corso, through the solemn heart of the decayed city, without extending its shallow influence on either side. Nor, even within its own limits, does it affect the mass of spectators, but only a comparatively few, in street and balcony, who carry on the warfare of nosegays and counterfeit sugar plums. The populace look on with staid composure; the nobility and priesthood take little or no part in the matter; and, but for the hordes of Anglo-Saxons who annually take up the flagging mirth, the Carnival might long ago have been swept away, with the snowdrifts of confetti that whiten all the pavement.



No doubt, however, the worn-out festival is still new to the youthful and light hearted, who make the worn-out world itself as fresh as Adam found it on his first forenoon in Paradise. It may be only age and care that chill the life out of its grotesque and airy riot, with the impertinence of their cold criticism.

Kenyon, though young, had care enough within his breast to render the Carnival the emptiest of mockeries. Contrasting the stern anxiety of his present mood with the frolic spirit of the preceding year, he fancied that so much trouble had, at all events, brought wisdom in its train. But there is a wisdom that looks grave, and sneers at merriment; and again a deeper wisdom, that stoops to be gay as often as occasion serves, and oftenest avails itself of shallow and trifling grounds of mirth; because, if we wait for more substantial ones, we seldom can be gay at all. Therefore, had it been possible, Kenyon would have done well to mask himself in some wild, hairy visage, and plunge into the throng of other maskers, as at the Carnival before. Then Donatello had danced along the Corso in all the equipment of a Faun, doing the part with wonderful felicity of execution, and revealing furry ears, which looked absolutely real; and Miriam had been alternately a lady of the antique regime, in powder and brocade, and the prettiest peasant girl of the Campagna, in the gayest of costumes; while Hilda, sitting demurely in a balcony, had hit the sculptor with a single rosebud,—so sweet and fresh a bud that he knew at once whose hand had flung it.

These were all gone; all those dear friends whose sympathetic mirth had made him gay. Kenyon felt as if an interval of many years had passed since the last Carnival. He had grown old, the nimble jollity was tame, and the maskers dull and heavy; the Corso was but a narrow and shabby street of decaying palaces; and even the long, blue streamer of Italian sky, above it, not half so brightly blue as formerly.

Yet, if he could have beheld the scene with his clear, natural eyesight, he might still have found both merriment and splendor in it. Everywhere, and all day long, there had been tokens of the festival, in the baskets brimming over with bouquets, for sale at the street corners, or borne about on people's heads; while bushels upon bushels of variously colored confetti were displayed, looking just like veritable sugar plums; so that a stranger would have imagined that the whole commerce and business of stern old Rome lay in flowers and sweets. And now, in the sunny afternoon, there could hardly be a spectacle more picturesque than the vista of that noble street, stretching into the interminable distance between two rows of lofty edifices, from every window of which, and many a balcony, flaunted gay and gorgeous carpets, bright silks, scarlet cloths with rich golden fringes, and Gobelin tapestry, still lustrous with varied hues, though the product of antique looms. Each separate palace



had put on a gala dress, and looked festive for the occasion, whatever sad or guilty secret it might hide within. Every window, moreover, was alive with the faces of women, rosy girls, and children, all kindled into brisk and mirthful expression, by the incidents in the street below. In the balconies that projected along the palace fronts stood groups of ladies, some beautiful, all richly dressed, scattering forth their laughter, shrill, yet sweet, and the musical babble of their voices, to thicken into an airy tumult over the heads of common mortals.

All these innumerable eyes looked down into the street, the whole capacity of which was thronged with festal figures, in such fantastic variety that it had taken centuries to contrive them; and through the midst of the mad, merry stream of human life rolled slowly onward a never-ending procession of all the vehicles in Rome, from the ducal carriage, with the powdered coachman high in front, and the three golden lackeys clinging in the rear, down to the rustic cart drawn by its single donkey. Among this various crowd, at windows and in balconies, in cart, cab, barouche, or gorgeous equipage, or bustling to and fro afoot, there was a sympathy of nonsense; a true and genial brotherhood and sisterhood, based on the honest purpose—and a wise one, too—of being foolish, all together. The sport of mankind, like its deepest earnest, is a battle; so these festive people fought one another with an ammunition of sugar plums and flowers.

Not that they were veritable sugar plums, however, but something that resembled them only as the apples of Sodom look like better fruit. They were concocted mostly of lime, with a grain of oat, or some other worthless kernel, in the midst. Besides the hailstorm of confetti, the combatants threw handfuls of flour or lime into the air, where it hung like smoke over a battlefield, or, descending, whitened a black coat or priestly robe, and made the curly locks of youth irreverently hoary.

At the same time with this acrid contest of quicklime, which caused much effusion of tears from suffering eyes, a gentler warfare of flowers was carried on, principally between knights and ladies. Originally, no doubt, when this pretty custom was first instituted, it may have had a sincere and modest import. Each youth and damsel, gathering bouquets of field flowers, or the sweetest and fairest that grew in their own gardens, all fresh and virgin blossoms, flung them with true aim at the one, or few, whom they regarded with a sentiment of shy partiality at least, if not with love. Often, the lover in the Corso may thus have received from his bright mistress, in her father's princely balcony, the first sweet intimation that his passionate glances had not struck against a heart of marble. What more appropriate mode of suggesting her tender secret could a maiden find than by the soft hit of a rosebud against a young man's cheek?



This was the pastime and the earnest of a more innocent and homelier age. Nowadays the nosegays are gathered and tied up by sordid hands, chiefly of the most ordinary flowers, and are sold along the Corso, at mean price, yet more than such Venal things are worth. Buying a basketful, you find them miserably wilted, as if they had flown hither and thither through two or three carnival days already; muddy, too, having been fished up from the pavement, where a hundred feet have trampled on them. You may see throngs of men and boys who thrust themselves beneath the horses' hoofs to gather up bouquets that were aimed amiss from balcony and carriage; these they sell again, and yet once more, and ten times over, defiled as they all are with the wicked filth of Rome.

Such are the flowery favors—the fragrant bunches of sentiment—that fly between cavalier and dame, and back again, from one end of the Corso to the other. Perhaps they may symbolize, more aptly than was intended, the poor, battered, wilted hearts of those who fling them; hearts which—crumpled and crushed by former possessors, and stained with various mishap—have been passed from hand to hand along the muddy street-way of life, instead of being treasured in one faithful bosom.

These venal and polluted flowers, therefore, and those deceptive bonbons, are types of the small reality that still subsists in the observance of the Carnival. Yet the government seemed to imagine that there might be excitement enough,—wild mirth, perchance, following its antics beyond law, and frisking from frolic into earnest,—to render it expedient to guard the Corso with an imposing show of military power. Besides the ordinary force of gendarmes, a strong patrol of papal dragoons, in steel helmets and white cloaks, were stationed at all the street corners. Detachments of French infantry stood by their stacked muskets in the Piazza del Popolo, at one extremity of the course, and before the palace of the Austrian embassy, at the other, and by the column of Antoninus, midway between. Had that chained tiger-cat, the Roman populace, shown only so much as the tip of his claws, the sabres would have been flashing and the bullets whistling, in right earnest, among the combatants who now pelted one another with mock sugar plums and wilted flowers.

But, to do the Roman people justice, they were restrained by a better safeguard than the sabre or the bayonet; it was their own gentle courtesy, which imparted a sort of sacredness to the hereditary festival. At first sight of a spectacle so fantastic and extravagant, a cool observer might have imagined the whole town gone mad; but, in the end, he would see that all this apparently unbounded license is kept strictly within a limit of its own; he would admire a people who can so freely let loose their mirthful propensities, while muzzling those fiercer ones that tend to mischief. Everybody seemed lawless; nobody was rude. If any reveller



overstepped the mark, it was sure to be no Roman, but an Englishman or an American; and even the rougher play of this Gothic race was still softened by the insensible influence of a moral atmosphere more delicate, in some respects, than we breathe at home. Not that, after all, we like the fine Italian spirit better than our own; popular rudeness is sometimes the symptom of rude moral health. But, where a Carnival is in question, it would probably pass off more decorously, as well as more airily and delightfully, in Rome, than in any Anglo-Saxon city.

When Kenyon emerged from a side lane into the Corso, the mirth was at its height. Out of the seclusion of his own feelings, he looked forth at the tapestried and damask-curtained palaces, the slow-moving double line of carriages, and the motley maskers that swarmed on foot, as if he were gazing through the iron lattice of a prison window. So remote from the scene were his sympathies, that it affected him like a thin dream, through the dim, extravagant material of which he could discern more substantial objects, while too much under its control to start forth broad awake. Just at that moment, too, there came another spectacle, making its way right through the masquerading throng.

It was, first and foremost, a full band of martial music, reverberating, in that narrow and confined though stately avenue, between the walls of the lofty palaces, and roaring upward to the sky with melody so powerful that it almost grew to discord. Next came a body of cavalry and mounted gendarmes, with great display of military pomp. They were escorting a long train of equipages, each and all of which shone as gorgeously as Cinderella's coach, with paint and gilding. Like that, too, they were provided with coachmen of mighty breadth, and enormously tall footmen, in immense powdered wigs, and all the splendor of gold-laced, three cornered hats, and embroidered silk coats and breeches. By the old-fashioned magnificence of this procession, it might worthily have included his Holiness in person, with a suite of attendant Cardinals, if those sacred dignitaries would kindly have lent their aid to heighten the frolic of the Carnival. But, for all its show of a martial escort, and its antique splendor of costume, it was but a train of the municipal authorities of Rome,—illusive shadows, every one, and among them a phantom, styled the Roman Senator,—proceeding to the Capitol.

The riotous interchange of nosegays and confetti was partially suspended, while the procession passed. One well-directed shot, however,—it was a double handful of powdered lime, flung by an impious New Englander,—hit the coachman of the Roman Senator full in the face, and hurt his dignity amazingly. It appeared to be his opinion that the Republic was again crumbling into ruin, and that the dust of it now filled his nostrils; though, in fact, it



would hardly be distinguished from the official powder with which he was already plentifully bestrewn.

While the sculptor, with his dreamy eyes, was taking idle note of this trifling circumstance, two figures passed before him, hand in hand. The countenance of each was covered with an impenetrable black mask; but one seemed a peasant of the Campagna; the other, a contadina in her holiday costume.

