

# The Marble Faun

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

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## *Chapter 50: Miriam, Hilda, Kenyon, Donatello*

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The gentle reader, we trust, would not thank us for one of those minute elucidations, which are so tedious, and, after all, so unsatisfactory, in clearing up the romantic mysteries of a story. He is too wise to insist upon looking closely at the wrong side of the tapestry, after the right one has been sufficiently displayed to him, woven with the best of the artist's skill, and cunningly arranged with a view to the harmonious exhibition of its colors. If any brilliant, or beautiful, or even tolerable effect have been produced, this pattern of kindly readers will accept it at its worth, without tearing its web apart, with the idle purpose of discovering how the threads have been knit together; for the sagacity by which he is distinguished will long ago have taught him that any narrative of human action and adventure whether we call it history or romance—is certain to be a fragile handiwork, more easily rent than mended. The actual experience of even the most ordinary life is full of events that never explain themselves, either as regards their origin or their tendency.

It would be easy, from conversations which we have held with the sculptor, to suggest a clew to the mystery of Hilda's disappearance; although, as long as she remained in Italy, there was a remarkable reserve in her communications upon this subject, even to her most intimate friends. Either a pledge of secrecy had been exacted, or a prudential motive warned her not to reveal the stratagems of a religious body, or the secret acts of a despotic government—whichever might be responsible in the present instance—while still within the scope of their jurisdiction. Possibly, she might not herself be fully aware what power had laid its grasp upon her person. What has chiefly perplexed us, however, among Hilda's adventures, is the mode of her release, in which some inscrutable tyranny or other seemed to take part in the frolic of the Carnival. We can only account for it, by supposing that the fitful and fantastic imagination of a woman—sportive, because she must otherwise be desperate—had arranged this incident, and made it the condition of a step which her conscience, or the conscience of another, required her to take.



A few days after Hilda's reappearance, she and the sculptor were straying together through the streets of Rome. Being deep in talk, it so happened that they found themselves near the majestic, pillared portico, and huge, black rotundity of the Pantheon. It stands almost at the central point of the labyrinthine intricacies of the modern city, and often presents itself before the bewildered stranger, when he is in search of other objects. Hilda, looking up, proposed that they should enter.

"I never pass it without going in," she said, "to pay my homage at the tomb of Raphael."

"Nor I," said Kenyon, "without stopping to admire the noblest edifice which the barbarism of the early ages, and the more barbarous pontiffs and princes of later ones, have spared to us."

They went in accordingly, and stood in the free space of that great circle, around which are ranged the arched recesses and stately altars, formerly dedicated to heathen gods, but Christianized through twelve centuries gone by. The world has nothing else like the Pantheon. So grand it is, that the pasteboard statues over the lofty cornice do not disturb the effect, any more than the tin crowns and hearts, the dusty artificial flowers, and all manner of trumpery gew-gaws, hanging at the saintly shrines. The rust and dinginess that have dimmed the precious marble on the walls; the pavement, with its great squares and rounds of porphyry and granite, cracked crosswise and in a hundred directions, showing how roughly the troublesome ages have trampled here; the gray dome above, with its opening to the sky, as if heaven were looking down into the interior of this place of worship, left unimpeded for prayers to ascend the more freely; all these things make an impression of solemnity, which St. Peter's itself fails to produce.

"I think," said the sculptor, "it is to the aperture in the dome—that great Eye, gazing heavenward that the Pantheon owes the peculiarity of its effect. It is so heathenish, as it were,—so unlike all the snugness of our modern civilization! Look, too, at the pavement, directly beneath the open space! So much rain has fallen there, in the last two thousand years, that it is green with small, fine moss, such as grows over tombstones in a damp English churchyard."

"I like better," replied Hilda, "to look at the bright, blue sky, roofing the edifice where the builders left it open. It is very delightful, in a breezy day, to see the masses of white cloud float over the opening, and then the sunshine fall through it again, fitfully, as it does now. Would it be any wonder if we were to see angels hovering there, partly in and partly out, with genial, heavenly faces, not intercepting the light, but only transmuting it into beautiful



colors? Look at that broad, golden beam—a sloping cataract of sunlight—which comes down from the aperture and rests upon the shrine, at the right hand of the entrance!”

“There is a dusky picture over that altar,” observed the sculptor. “Let us go and see if this strong illumination brings out any merit in it.”

Approaching the shrine, they found the picture little worth looking at, but could not forbear smiling, to see that a very plump and comfortable tabby-cat—whom we ourselves have often observed haunting the Pantheon—had established herself on the altar, in the genial sunbeam, and was fast asleep among the holy tapers. Their footsteps disturbing her, she awoke, raised herself, and sat blinking in the sun, yet with a certain dignity and self-possession, as if conscious of representing a saint.

“I presume,” remarked Kenyon, “that this is the first of the feline race that has ever set herself up as an object of worship, in the Pantheon or elsewhere, since the days of ancient Egypt. See; there is a peasant from the neighboring market, actually kneeling to her! She seems a gracious and benignant saint enough.”

“Do not make me laugh,” said Hilda reproachfully, “but help me to drive the creature away. It distresses me to see that poor man, or any human being, directing his prayers so much amiss.”

“Then, Hilda,” answered the sculptor more seriously, “the only Place in the Pantheon for you and me to kneel is on the pavement beneath the central aperture. If we pray at a saint’s shrine, we shall give utterance to earthly wishes; but if we pray face to face with the Deity, we shall feel it impious to petition for aught that is narrow and selfish. Methinks it is this that makes the Catholics so delight in the worship of saints; they can bring up all their little worldly wants and whims, their individualities and human weaknesses, not as things to be repented of, but to be humored by the canonized humanity to which they pray. Indeed, it is very tempting!”

What Hilda might have answered must be left to conjecture; for as she turned from the shrine, her eyes were attracted to the figure of a female penitent, kneeling on the pavement just beneath the great central eye, in the very spot which Kenyon had designated as the only one whence prayers should ascend. The upturned face was invisible, behind a veil or mask, which formed a part of the garb.

“It cannot be!” whispered Hilda, with emotion. “No; it cannot be!”

“What disturbs you?” asked Kenyon. “Why do you tremble so?”

“If it were possible,” she replied, “I should fancy that kneeling figure to be Miriam!”



"As you say, it is impossible," rejoined the sculptor; "We know too well what has befallen both her and Donatello."

"Yes; it is impossible!" repeated Hilda. Her voice was still tremulous, however, and she seemed unable to withdraw her attention from the kneeling figure. Suddenly, and as if the idea of Miriam had opened the whole volume of Hilda's reminiscences, she put this question to the sculptor: "Was Donatello really a Faun?"

"If you had ever studied the pedigree of the far-descended heir of Monte Beni, as I did," answered Kenyon, with an irrepressible smile, "you would have retained few doubts on that point. Faun or not, he had a genial nature, which, had the rest of mankind been in accordance with it, would have made earth a paradise to our poor friend. It seems the moral of his story, that human beings of Donatello's character, compounded especially for happiness, have no longer any business on earth, or elsewhere. Life has grown so sadly serious, that such men must change their nature, or else perish, like the antediluvian creatures that required, as the condition of their existence, a more summer-like atmosphere than ours."

"I will not accept your moral!" replied the hopeful and happy-natured Hilda.

"Then here is another; take your choice!" said the sculptor, remembering what Miriam had recently suggested, in reference to the same point. "He perpetrated a great crime; and his remorse, gnawing into his soul, has awakened it; developing a thousand high capabilities, moral and intellectual, which we never should have dreamed of asking for, within the scanty compass of the Donatello whom we knew."

"I know not whether this is so," said Hilda. "But what then?"

"Here comes my perplexity," continued Kenyon. "Sin has educated Donatello, and elevated him. Is sin, then,—which we deem such a dreadful blackness in the universe,—is it, like sorrow, merely an element of human education, through which we struggle to a higher and purer state than we could otherwise have attained? Did Adam fall, that we might ultimately rise to a far loftier paradise than his?"

"O hush!" cried Hilda, shrinking from him with an expression of horror which wounded the poor, speculative sculptor to the soul. "This is terrible; and I could weep for you, if you indeed believe it. Do not you perceive what a mockery your creed makes, not only of all religious sentiments, but of moral law? And how it annuls and obliterates whatever precepts of Heaven are written deepest within us? You have shocked me beyond words!"

"Forgive me, Hilda!" exclaimed the sculptor, startled by her agitation; "I never did believe it! But the mind wanders wild and wide; and, so lonely as I live and work, I have neither pole-star above nor light of cottage windows here below, to bring me home. Were



you my guide, my counsellor, my inmost friend, with that white wisdom which clothes you as a celestial garment, all would go well. O Hilda, guide me home!"

"We are both lonely; both far from home!" said Hilda, her eyes filling with tears. "I am a poor, weak girl, and have no such wisdom as you fancy in me."

What further may have passed between these lovers, while standing before the pillared shrine, and the marble Madonna that marks Raphael's tomb; whither they had now wandered, we are unable to record. But when the kneeling figure beneath the open eye of the Pantheon arose, she looked towards the pair and extended her hands with a gesture of benediction. Then they knew that it was Miriam. They suffered her to glide out of the portal, however, without a greeting; for those extended hands, even while they blessed, seemed to repel, as if Miriam stood on the other side of a fathomless abyss, and warned them from its verge.

So Kenyon won the gentle Hilda's shy affection, and her consent to be his bride. Another hand must henceforth trim the lamp before the Virgin's shrine; for Hilda was coming down from her old tower, to be herself enshrined and worshipped as a household saint, in the light of her husband's fireside. And, now that life had so much human promise in it, they resolved to go back to their own land; because the years, after all, have a kind of emptiness, when we spend too many of them on a foreign shore. We defer the reality of life, in such cases, until a future moment, when we shall again breathe our native air; but, by and by, there are no future moments; or, if we do return, we find that the native air has lost its invigorating quality, and that life has shifted its reality to the spot where we have deemed ourselves only temporary residents. Thus, between two countries, we have none at all, or only that little space of either in which we finally lay down our discontented bones. It is wise, therefore, to come back betimes, or never.

Before they quitted Rome, a bridal gift was laid on Hilda's table. It was a bracelet, evidently of great cost, being composed of seven ancient Etruscan gems, dug out of seven sepulchres, and each one of them the signet of some princely personage, who had lived an immemorial time ago. Hilda remembered this precious ornament. It had been Miriam's; and once, with the exuberance of fancy that distinguished her, she had amused herself with telling a mythical and magic legend for each gem, comprising the imaginary adventures and catastrophe of its former wearer. Thus the Etruscan bracelet became the connecting bond of a series of seven wondrous tales, all of which, as they were dug out of seven sepulchres, were characterized by a sevenfold sepulchral gloom; such as Miriam's imagination, shadowed by her own misfortunes, was wont to fling over its most sportive flights.



And now, happy as Hilda was, the bracelet brought the tears into her eyes, as being, in its entire circle, the symbol of as sad a mystery as any that Miriam had attached to the separate gems. For, what was Miriam's life to be? And where was Donatello? But Hilda had a hopeful soul, and saw sunlight on the mountain-tops.

