

Richards Laura Elizabeth Howe

Narcissa, or the Road to Rome; In Verona



Laura Richards

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NARCISSA. THE ROAD TO ROME

Part I. DREAMING

Narcissa was sitting in the doorway, feeding the young turkeys. It was the back door of the old gray house, – no one would have thought of sitting in the front doorway, – and there were crooked flagstones leading up to it, cracked and seamed, with grass growing in the cracks. Close by the door-post, against which the girl was leaning, stood a great bush of tansy, with waving feathery leaves and yellow blossoms, like small gold buttons. Narcissa was very fond of this tansy-bush, and liked to pluck a leaf and crush it in her hands, to bring out the keen, wholesome smell. She had one in her hand now, and was wondering if ever any one had a dress of green velvet, tansy-color, with gold buttons. The minister's wife once had a bow of green velvet on her black straw bonnet, and Narcissa had loved to look at it, and to wish it were somewhere else, with things that belonged to it. She often thought of splendid clothes, though she had never seen anything finer than the black silk of the minister's wife, and that always made her think of a newly-blackened stove. When she was younger, she had made a romance about every scrap of silk or satin in the crazy-quilt that Aunt Pinker's daughter, the milliner, had sent her one Christmas. The gown she had had out of that yellow satin – it did her good to think about it even now! – and there was a scrap of pale pink silk which came – was it really nothing but fancy? – from a long, trailing robe, trimmed with filmy lace (the lace in the story-papers was always filmy), in which she had passed many happy, dreamy hours.

It never occurred to Narcissa that she needed no fine clothes to set off her beauty; in truth, she never dreamed that she had any beauty. Color meant so much to her, that she had always accepted the general verdict that she was "pindlin'-lookin'," and joined sincerely in the chorus of praise which always greeted the rosy cheeks and solid-looking yellow hair of Delilah Parshley, who lived at the next house below the old gray one.

Yet it was true that Narcissa had no need of finery; and it was a pretty picture she made, sitting in the doorway, leaning against the door-post. Her hair was nearly black, with no gloss or sparkle, only a soft, dusky cloudiness. It curled in little rings about her broad, low forehead, and round her soft, pale cheeks. Her eyes were dusky, too, but more gray than brown, and the only vivid color was in the scarlet line of her lips. There was nothing unhealthy in her clear pallor, no hint of sallowness, but a soft, white glow. The nostrils of her little straight nose were cut high, which gave them a look of being always slightly dilated; this caused the neighbors to say that Narcissa White was proud, though dear knew what she had to be proud of. As for her dress, it was of blue jean, a good deal faded, but all the better for that; and her white apron, though coarse, was spotless and carefully starched.

The turkeys seemed to approve of her appearance, for they gathered eagerly round her, trying to get their beaks into the dish she held, gobbling and fluttering, and making a great commotion. Narcissa was fond of the turkeys, and had names for all her favorites. The finest young gobbler was called Black Diamond, and he was apt to take unfair advantage of his mistress's partiality, and to get more than his share. So noisy they all were, that Narcissa did not hear the sound of approaching

footsteps, nor know that some one had spoken to her twice in vain, and was now standing in silent amusement, watching the struggle for food.

It was a young man who had come so lightly up the steps of the old house that no sound had been heard. He had gone first to the front door, but his knock had brought no answer, and catching the flutter of Narcissa's apron he had come round to the back porch and was standing within three feet of the girl and her clamorous brood.

A very young man, hardly more than a boy, yet with a steady, manly look in his blue eyes, which contradicted the boyish curves of cheek and chin. He was plainly but neatly dressed, and he carried in one hand a small satchel, such as travelling agents affect. His eyes were bright and quick, and glanced about with keen interest, taking in every outline of the house, but coming always back to the girl who sat in the doorway, and who was unlike any girl he had seen before. The house was dim and gaunt, with a look of great age. One did not often, in this part of the country, see such tall doors, such quaint chimneys, such irregular outlines of roof and gable. The green-painted front door, with its brass knocker, and its huge, old-world hinges, seemed to him a great curiosity; so did the high stone steps, whose forlorn dignity suffered perpetual insult from the malapert weeds and grasses that laughed and nodded through the cracks and seams.

And in the dim, sunken doorway sat this girl, herself all soft and shadowy, with a twilight look in her eyes and in her dusky hair. The turkeys were the only part of it all that seemed to belong to the sort of life about here, the hard, bustling life of New England farm-people, such as he had seen at the other houses along the way. If it were not for the turkeys, he felt that he should hardly find courage to speak, for fear it might all melt away into the gathering twilight, – house, maiden, and all, – and leave nothing but the tall elms that waved their spectral arms over the sunken roofs.

As it was, however, – as the turkeys were making such a racket that the girl would never become aware of his presence unless he asserted himself in some way, – he stepped boldly forward and lifted his hat, for he had been taught good manners, if he was a tree-agent.

"Excuse me, lady," he said. "Is this the road to Rome?"

Narcissa started violently, and came out of her dream. She had actually been dressed in the green velvet, and was fastening the last gold button, ready to step into the chariot that was waiting for her, – she loved the word chariot, though the pictures in the Bible made her feel uncertain about the manner of riding in one, – and to drive along the road, the road to Rome. How strange that at this very moment some one should ask about the road!

She raised her eyes, still shining with the dream-light, and looked attentively at the stranger.

"Yes, sir," she answered. "This is the road, – the road to Rome. But it's a long way from here," she added, rousing herself, and rising from her seat. "Shoo! go away, now;" and she waved a signal of dismissal with her apron which the turkeys understood, and at sight of which they withdrew, not without angry cluckings and gobblings directed at the disturber of their evening meal.

"Won't you set down and rest a spell? It's ben real hot to-day, though it's some cooler now."

"It has so!" assented the young man, taking off his hat again to wipe his brow, and dropping his satchel on the doorstep.

"I should be pleased to set a few minutes, if I'm not intruding. And do you suppose I could have a drink of water, if it wouldn't be too much trouble?"

Narcissa went away without a word, and brought back the water, ice-cold and clear as crystal, in a queer brown mug with a twisted handle, and an inscription in white letters.

"I'm sorry I haven't got a glass," she said. "But the water is good."

The young man drank deeply, and then looked curiously at the mug. "I'd rather have this than a glass," he said. "It's quite a curiosity, ain't it? 'Be Merry!' Well, that's a good sentiment, I'm sure. Thank you, lady. I'm ever so much obliged."

"You no need to," responded Narcissa, civilly.

"I – I don't suppose you want any trees or plants to set out, do you?" said the stranger. "I am travelling for a house near Portland, and I've got some first-rate things, – real chances, I call 'em."

"I – guess not," said Narcissa, with an apprehensive glance over her shoulder. "I only keep house for the man here, – he's my father's uncle, – and he don't buy such things. I wish" – she sighed, and looked longingly at the black satchel. "I suppose you've got roses, have you, and all kinds of flowers?"

"I should think so!" replied the youth, proudly. "Our house is the greatest one in the State for roses. Let me show you some pictures." He opened the satchel and took out a black order-book filled with brilliant pictures.

"Oh!" cried Narcissa, "I – I guess I'd better not look at 'em. I don't believe he'd like it. Not but what I'm just as much obliged to you," she added, hastily.

But the stranger had already opened the book.

"Just look here, lady," he said. "Why, it can't do no manner of hurt for you to look at them. Just see here! Here's the Jacqueminot rose, the finest in the world, some folks think. Why, we've got beds and beds of it. Splendid grower, and sweet – well there! I can't give you any idea of it. Cornelia Cook! that's a great rose nowadays. And here's a white blush, that looks for all the world like – "

Here he stopped suddenly; for it was Narcissa's cheek that the rose was like, he thought, and it came to him suddenly that he did not want to say such things to this girl.

The girl at the house below, when he had paid her compliments, had laughed in his face, well pleased, and seemed to ask for more; but she was an ordinary girl, like other folks. This soft, shadowy maiden might shrink away, and vanish in the dusky porch, if he should touch her rudely.

He need have had no fear, for Narcissa would hardly have heard or understood his compliment. She was gazing with hungry eyes at the bright pictures, drinking in every shade of crimson and scarlet and gold.

"Oh, stop!" she cried eagerly. "Oh, may I read about that one? Ain't it beautiful! May I?"

"Well, I should think you might!" replied the gallant agent, holding the book toward her. "Here, lean right over me; I'd like to read it too."

"This grand rose," Narcissa read aloud, "has created an epoch in rose-growing. Of free habit and luxurious growth, the plants form the most splendid ornament of garden or hot-house. The beautiful, perfectly-shaped flowers show a marvellous blending of colors, in which a rich apricot predominates, shading into light pink, bright canary, and pale yellow. The outer petals are grandly recurved, forming a fine contrast to the Camellia-like inner petals. With its rare and exquisite fragrance, its bold and beautiful foliage, and the unparalleled profusion with which its splendid blossoms are borne, we claim that this rose is absolutely *without a rival*."

Narcissa drew a long breath and looked up, her eyes full of awe and admiration. "Ain't that elegant?" she said simply. "They have great writers there, don't they?"

The youth smiled, as he thought of little Mr. Bimsey, who "got up" the catalogues and kept the accounts; then, reminded by this and by the fading light that he had still a good way to go before nightfall, he added, rising reluctantly from his seat, —

"I must be going, I guess. You haven't any notion how far it might be to Rome, have you, lady?"

Narcissa shook her head.

"It's a long way," she said. "When Uncle Pinker goes there with the turkeys in the fall, it takes him the whole day to go and come."

"You haven't got a map of the county?" persisted the youth. "I'd ought to have one myself, and I guess I shall have to get me one. I'm a stranger in these parts."

Narcissa shook her head again. "We haven't got any kind of a map, as I know of," she said; but next moment her face brightened. "We've got a picture of Rome," she said, – "a real handsome picture. Would you like to see it?"

"Well, if it ain't too much trouble."

Narcissa led the way into the house, cautioning the stranger to tread softly. "Uncle Pinker is asleep," she said. "He's real old, and he sleeps in the afternoon, most times. He's so deaf, he wouldn't hear you most likely, but you never can count on deaf folks. Not but what he'd be pleased to see you," she added, with a doubtful look at a closed door as she passed it.

"I'd ought to make you acquainted with my name, seem's though," said the agent, following her into a dim, dreary room. "My name's Patten, – Romulus Patten." He paused, and then went on: "Folks always ask how I got my name, so I get into the way of firing right ahead before they ask. My mother got it out of the history book. She was a great hand for history, my mother was. It seems queer, my going to Rome, don't it? They made consid'able fun about it, down to our place, but I'm used to that, and don't mind it."

There was no answering gleam in Narcissa's lovely eyes. "Romulus? was he in the Revolution?" she asked. "I had to leave school before we got through history. I'd only got as far as the Battle of Lexington, when Aunt Pinker died, and I had to come and keep house for Uncle Pinker. It was real interestin'," she added, with a little sigh of regret, "I wish't I could have finished history."

Romulus Patten flushed with shame and anger, – not at the girl, but at the sordid people who had kept her in ignorance. He had gone through General History himself, and having a good memory, considered himself very well up in such matters. When he came back, he thought, perhaps he might manage to stop a spell, and tell her a little about things. Romulus in the Revolution! it was a scandalous shame, and she so sweet and pretty!

But here was the picture of Rome, and Narcissa turning with gentle pride to introduce him to it.

"Ain't it handsome?" she cried with enthusiasm. "I do like to look at it the most of anything, seem's though. I think you're real fortunate to be going there, Mr. – Mr. Patten."

She was silent, gazing with delight that was fresh every time her eyes rested on the beloved picture; and Romulus Patten was silent too.

What was it he saw?

Asteel engraving, dim and gray, like the house, like the walls on which it hung; framed in dingy gold, spotted and streaked. Within, as in a dull mirror, appeared towers and temples, columned porticos and triumphal arches: the whole seemed to be steeped in pale sunshine; in the background rose a monstrous shape which Romulus' practised eye, familiar with the illustrations in the General History, recognized as the Coliseum. "That's Rome!" said Narcissa, softly. "Ain't it elegant?"

The young man glanced at her, with a light of sympathetic amusement in his eyes. This was her little joke; he had hardly thought she would make jokes, she was so quiet. But the smile faded into a look of bewilderment, which quickly strove to efface itself; for Narcissa was not in jest. She was gazing at the picture with a rapt look, with almost passionate enjoyment. She had forgotten him for the moment, and had entered the city of her dreams as she so often entered it, robed in velvet and satin (it was the tansy-colored velvet this time, and the buttons were very splendid indeed, and she had a bunch of roses in her hand), riding in a chariot. She was passing under those wonderful arches; that soft, mysterious sunshine wrapped her in a cloud of glory. Presently she would meet other beings, splendidly dressed like herself, who would greet her with smiles, and tell her of other strange and beautiful things that she was going to see. Ah, to be in Rome! to be really going there!

"Ain't it handsome?" she repeated, turning her soft eyes on her companion. "You're real fortunate to be going there."

Romulus Patten stammered. "You – you're sure that is Rome?" he said. "This same Rome, down east here? It don't hardly seem just like a down-east place, does it?"

The soft eyes grew wide, and the lips smiled a little. "Why, it says so!" said Narcissa. "See here, right under the picture, 'Rome.' So it couldn't be any place else, could it?"

"I – I suppose not," murmured Romulus, hanging his head, like one found in an unpardonable ignorance.

"I hope to go there some day," the girl went on. "It's never been so I could, yet; and folks don't go much from about here. Ain't it queer? They'll go the other way, to Tupham, and Cyrus, and other places that's just like – like to home here, – " and she gave a little disparaging glance along the bleak road, with its straggling willows and birches, – "and there's scarcely anybody goes to Rome. And it like that!" she added, with another look of loving reverence at the old picture.

"You said something about your uncle going," suggested Romulus. "Hasn't he ever told you about the place, – whether it's like the picture?"

Narcissa shook her head. "I asked him last time he come back," she said. "I've asked him two or three times; but all he does is nod his head and laugh, the way he has. He ain't one to talk, Uncle Pinker ain't. He goes to Rome once every fall, when he kills the turkeys. The biggest part of 'em goes the other way, to Tupham and on beyond, but he allers takes some portion to Rome. He says they're great on turkeys there. I should think they would be, shouldn't you?"

This was a long speech for Narcissa, and she relapsed into silence and the picture.

"And you live all alone here with a deaf old man who don't talk?" said Romulus Patten. "Excuse *me*, Miss – well, you haven't told me your name, have you?" and he laughed a little.

"Narcissa," was the reply. "Narcissa White."

"Thank you!" said the well-mannered Romulus. "You live all alone with him, and don't see no company? It's lonesome for you, ain't it?"

"I – don't – know," Narcissa answered thoughtfully. "I never thought much about it's bein' lonesome. I have the turkeys, and they're a good deal of company: and I – I think about things." A faint color stole into her clear white cheek, as she remembered the velvet gown. She supposed a man would consider such thoughts "triflin'."

"Don't you see anything of the neighbors?" the young man persisted. "There's a young lady down at the next house, half a mile below here, – wide-awake looking girl, with yeller hair and red cheeks, looks some like a geranium; don't you know her?"

"That's Delilah Parshley!" said Narcissa. "She's real handsome, don't you think so? No, I don't see her, only to meetin' sometimes. I guess she don't care to go much with folks up this way. Her friends is mostly the other way, on the Tupham road. Their house sets on the corner, you know."

Narcissa did not know – how should she? – that Delilah Parshley and the other girls of her sort considered her "a little wanting," because she was silent, and never seemed interested in the doings of the neighbors, or of such stray travellers as came along the road to Rome. She felt kindly toward the Parshleys, as toward all the "meetin' folks;" but she rarely held speech with them, and was "gettin' as dumb as the old man was deaf," the neighbors were beginning to say.

"But haven't you got any folks of your own?" this persistent young man went on. "I – I hope I'm not too forth-puttin', Miss White, but I'd like to know."

"I'm sure you're real kind to ask!" replied Narcissa, who was not used to having any one care to ask her questions.

"Yes, I've got *some* folks. Father's livin', but he's married again, and there's more children, and he was glad to have me find a chance; and it was so that I was glad, too," she added, with no resentment in her tone, but a touch of sadness, which made the ready color come into those tell-tale cheeks of Romulus Patten.

"It ain't right," he said hotly. "I'll be switched if it's right. Ain't there a better chance you could get, somewheres round here, if you don't feel to go fur away? If you did feel to make a change, there's lots of chances down our way. I'd be real pleased to be of assistance, if there was any ways I could; I would, now, Miss White."

Narcissa looked a little alarmed.

"You're real good," she said. "But I ain't thinkin' of any change. Uncle Pinker means well by me, and the work ain't too hard, 'cept come hayin' time, and along through the spring, sometimes, when I have to help in the garden. I'm sure I'm obliged to *you*!" she added gratefully, with a shy, sweet look in her eyes that made Romulus feel as if the day had grown suddenly warm again.

"Well!" he said, with an effort, "I reely must be going, I suppose. I've had a good rest, and I must be getting on."

But Narcissa was not ready to have him go now. Her heart had been stirred by the unwonted kindness, the interest which this handsome stranger with the kind eyes had shown in her, Narcissa White, who was of no account to any one in the world. Her heart was stirred, and now she must show her gratitude in such simple wise as she could. She made him sit down at the table, and brought him doughnuts and milk, and the prettiest apples she could find in the cellar. In fear and trembling she took from the cupboard a tumbler of apple jelly, wondering as she did so what Uncle Pinker would say, and whether he would call it stealing. She had made the sweetmeat herself, and had earned the money to buy a half-dozen tumblers, by braiding rugs for Mrs. Parshley. She had picked the apples, too. Altogether, she thought she had a right to offer the jelly to the kind stranger.

He was delighted with his little feast, and pronounced the jelly the best he had ever tasted. She made it herself? he wanted to know! girls were smart on the road to Rome, he guessed. He drank her health from the brown mug, and again she apologized for not having a glass to give him. "There is good glasses," she said with a blush, "but Uncle Pinker keeps 'em locked up. I broke one when I first come here, two years ago, and he's never let me touch one sence."

Romulus Patten muttered something in confidence to the brown mug, but Narcissa did not hear it. She was too happy to think that other people might consider Uncle Pinker a mean old curmudgeon. She felt a warmth about the heart, wholly strange to her starved and barren life. It had been dear and precious to dream, oh, yes! but here was reality. Here was some one like the people she dreamed about, only real flesh and blood, instead of shadows. He cared, this wonderful person, really cared, to be kind to her, to say pleasant words, and smile, and look at her with his bright, gentle eyes. And he was going to Rome! that was almost the best part of all, for now she could fancy him there, and would have some one to speak to, when she made her shadowy journeys to the Dream City.

She was hardly sorry when, the simple feast over, her new friend rose to go. It could not last forever, and Uncle Pinker would be waking up soon, and was apt to be "a little set," as she charitably expressed it, when he first woke. She made apologies for not having roused the old man, and was sure he would have been "real pleased" to see Mr. Patten, if it had been any other time of the day. She was a little startled when Romulus held out his hand at parting. She had an idea that people only shook hands at funerals; but she laid her little brown palm in the warm, strong one held out to her, and felt a cordial pressure that brought the tears to her eyes, – the sweet, forlorn gray eyes that never guessed at their own sweetness or sadness! Romulus Patten looked long into them before he let the little hand go.

"I sha'n't forget you, Miss White," he cried. "You may be sure of that; and I hope you won't forget me, either, for a spell. I may stop on my way back, if I don't have to go round another way when I leave Rome. I'll try my best to fix it so as I can come back this way, and then – then perhaps you'll let me call you Narcissa. Good-by – Narcissa!"

"Good-by!" echoed Narcissa; and then she stood on the doorstep and watched him, her new friend, the first friend she had ever had, as looking back often, and waving his hand once and twice in sign of farewell, he passed along down the road to Rome.

Part II. WAKING

"Good mornin', sir; can I sell you anything this mornin'?"

It was a strong, clear voice that broke rudely in upon Uncle Pinker's morning meditations as he sat in the doorway (the same setting that had framed Narcissa yesterday, but how different a picture!), smoking his short black pipe.

"Can I sell you anything?" repeated the voice, with an imperious intonation. Uncle Pinker looked up. The sound was a mere murmur in his ears; but when he saw the figure before him, he recognized it for one he had sometimes seen on the road, and knew instinctively what was wanted. "Ga-a-ah!" said Uncle Pinker.

This remark was a favorite one of the old gentleman's, and though no one knew its precise derivation, there was no doubt of its being the quintessence of scornful refusal. He used it constantly, but it never had such bitter force as when he was asked to spend money. "Ga-a-ah!" said Uncle Pinker again.

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