

# **THE PIAZZA**

Herman Melville



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# THE PIAZZA

## THE PIAZZA

### Herman Melville

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"With fairest flowers,  
Whilst summer lasts, and I live here, Fidele —"

When I removed into the country, it was to occupy an old-fashioned farmhouse, which had no piazza — a deficiency the more regretted because not only did I like piazzas, as somehow combining the coziness of indoors with the freedom of out-doors, and it is so pleasant to inspect your thermometer there, but the country round about was such a picture that in berry time no boy climbs hill or crosses vale without coming upon easels planted in every nook, and sunburnt painters painting there. A very paradise of painters. The circle of the stars cut by the circle of the mountains. At least, so looks it from the house; though, once upon the mountains, no circle of them can you see. Had the site been chosen five rods off, this charmed ring would not have been.

The house is old. Seventy years since, from the heart of the Hearth Stone Hills, they quarried the Kaaba, or Holy Stone, to which, each Thanksgiving, the social pilgrims used to come. So long ago that, in digging for the foundation, the workmen used both spade and ax, fighting the troglodytes of those subterranean parts — sturdy roots of a sturdy wood, encamped upon what is now a long landslide of sleeping meadow, sloping away off from my poppybed. Of that knit wood but one survivor stands — an elm, lonely through steadfastness.

Whoever built the house, he builded better than he knew, or else Orion in the zenith flashed down his Damocles' sword to him some starry night and said, "Build there." For how, otherwise, could it have entered the builder's mind, that, upon the clearing being made, such a purple prospect would be his? — nothing less than Greylock, with all his hills about him, like Charlemagne among his peers.

Now, for a house, so situated in such a country, to have no piazza for the convenience of those who might desire to feast upon a view, and take their time and ease about it, seemed as much of an omission as if a picture gallery should have no bench; for what but picture galleries are the marble halls of these same limestone hills? — galleries hung, month after month anew, with pictures ever fading into pictures ever fresh. And beauty is like piety — you cannot run and read it; tranquillity and constancy, with, nowadays, an easy chair, are needed. For though, of old, when reverence was in vogue and indolence was not, the devotees of Nature doubtless used to stand and adore — just as, in the cathedrals of those ages, the worshipers of a higher Power did — yet, in these times of failing faith and feeble knees, we have the piazza and the pew.

During the first year of my residence, the more leisurely to witness the coronation of Charlemagne (weather permitting, they crown him every sunrise and sunset), I chose me, on the hillside bank near by, a royal lounge of turf — a green velvet lounge, with long, moss-padded back; while at the head, strangely enough, there grew (but, I suppose, for heraldry) three tufts of blue violets in a field argent of wild strawberries; and a trellis, with honeysuckle, I set for canopy. Very majestic lounge, indeed. So much so that here, as with the reclining majesty of Denmark in his orchard, a sly earache invaded me. But, if damps abound at times in Westminster Abbey because it is so old, why not within this monastery of mountains, which is older?

The house was wide, my fortune narrow, so that, to build a panoramic piazza, one round and round, it could not be — although, indeed, considering the matter by rule and square, the carpenters, in the kindest way, were anxious to gratify my furthest wishes, at I've forgotten how much a foot.

Upon but one of the four sides would prudence grant me what I wanted. Now, which side?

To the east, that long camp of the Hearth Stone Hills, fading far away towards Quito, and every fall, a small white flake of something peering suddenly, of a coolish morning, from the topmost cliff — the season's

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new-dropped lamb, its earliest fleece; and then the Christmas dawn, draping those dun highlands with red-barred plaids and tartans — goodly sight from your piazza, that. Goodly sight; but, to the north is Charlemagne — can't have the Hearth Stone Hills with Charlemagne.

Well, the south side. Apple trees are there. Pleasant, of a balmy morning in the month of May, to sit and see that orchard, white-budded, as for a bridal; and, in October, one green arsenal yard, such piles of ruddy shot. Very fine, I grant; but, to the north is Charlemagne.

The west side, look. An upland pasture, alleying away into a maple wood at top. Sweet, in opening spring, to trace upon the hillside, otherwise gray and bare — to trace, I say, the oldest paths by their streaks of earliest green. Sweet, indeed, I can't deny; but, to the north is Charlemagne.

So Charlemagne, he carried it. It was not long after 1848, and, somehow, about that time, all round the world these kings, they had the casting vote, and voted for themselves.

No sooner was ground broken than all the neighborhood, neighbor Dives, in particular, broke, too — into a laugh. Piazza to the north! Winter Piazza! Wants, of winter midnights, to watch the Aurora Borealis, I suppose; hope he's laid in good store of polar muffs and mittens.

That was in the lion month of March. Not forgotten are the blue noses of the carpenters, and how they scouted at the greenness of the cit, who would build his sole piazza to the north. But March don't last forever; patience, and August comes. And then, in the cool elysium of my northern bower, I, Lazarus in Abraham's bosom, cast down the hill a pitying glance on poor old Dives, tormented in the purgatory of his piazza to the south.

But, even in December, this northern piazza does not repel — nipping cold and gusty though it be, and the north wind, like any miller, bolting by the snow in finest flour — for then, once more, with frosted beard, I pace the sleety deck, weathering Cape Horn.

In summer, too, Canute-like, sitting here, one is often reminded of the sea. For not only do long ground swells roll the slanting grain, and little wavelets of the grass ripple over upon the low piazza, as their beach, and the blown down of dandelions is wafted like the spray, and the purple of the mountains is just the purple of the billows, and a still August noon broods upon the deep meadows as a calm upon the Line, but the vastness and the lonesomeness are so oceanic and the silence and the sameness, too, that the first peep of a strange house, rising beyond the trees, is for all the world like spying, on the Barbary coast, an unknown sail.

And this recalls my inland voyage to fairyland. A true voyage, but, take it all in all, interesting as if invented.

From the piazza, some uncertain object I had caught, mysteriously snugged away, to all appearance, in a sort of purpled breast pocket, high up in a hopperlike hollow or sunken angle among the northwestern mountains — yet, whether, really, it was on a mountainside or a mountaintop could not be determined; because, though, viewed from favorable points, a blue summit, peering up away behind the rest, will, as it were, talk to you over their heads, and plainly tell you, that, though he (the blue summit) seems among them, he is not of them (God forbid!), and, indeed, would have you know that he considers himself — as, to say truth, he has good right — by several cubits their superior, nevertheless, certain ranges, here and there double-filed, as in platoons, so shoulder and follow up upon one another, with their irregular shapes and heights, that, from the piazza, a nigher and lower mountain will, in most states of the atmosphere, effacingly shade itself away into a higher and further one; that an object, bleak on the former's crest, will, for all that, appear nested in the latter's flank. These mountains, somehow, they play at hide-and-seek, and all before one's eyes.

But, be that as it may, the spot in question was, at all events, so situated as to be only visible, and then but vaguely, under certain witching conditions of light and shadow.

Indeed, for a year or more, I knew not there was such a spot, and might, perhaps, have never known, had it not been for a wizard afternoon in autumn — late in autumn — a mad poet's afternoon, when the turned maple woods in the broad basin below me, having lost their first vermilion tint, dully smoked, like smoldering towns, when flames expire upon their prey; and rumor had it that this smokiness in the general air was not all Indian summer — which was not used to be so sick a thing, however mild — but, in great part, was blown from far-off forests, for weeks on fire, in Vermont; so that no wonder the sky was ominous as Hecate's caldron — and two sportsmen, crossing a red stubble buckwheat field, seemed guilty Macbeth and foreboding Banquo; and the hermit sun, huttet in an Adullum cave, well towards the south, according to his season, did little else but, by indirect reflection of narrow rays shot down a Simplon Pass among the clouds, just steadily paint one small, round strawberry mole upon the wan cheek of northwestern hills. Signal as a candle. One spot of radiance, where all else

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was shade.

Fairies there, thought I; some haunted ring where fairies dance.

Time passed, and the following May, after a gentle shower upon the mountains — a little shower islanded in misty seas of sunshine; such a distant shower — and sometimes two, and three, and four of them, all visible together in different parts — as I love to watch from the piazza, instead of thunderstorms as I used to, which wrap old Greylock like a Sinai, till one thinks swart Moses must be climbing among scathed hemlocks there; after, I say, that gentle shower, I saw a rainbow, resting its further end just where, in autumn, I had marked the mole. Fairies there, thought I; remembering that rainbows bring out the blooms, and that, if one can but get to the rainbow's end, his fortune is made in a bag of gold. Yon rainbow's end, would I were there, thought I. And none the less I wished it, for now first noticing what seemed some sort of glen, or grotto, in the mountainside; at least, whatever it was, viewed through the rainbow's medium it glowed like the Potosi mine. But a workaday neighbor said no doubt it was but some old barn — an abandoned one, its broadside beaten in, the acclivity its background. But I, though I had never been there, I knew better.

A few days after, a cheery sunrise kindled a golden sparkle in the same spot as before. The sparkle was of that vividness it seemed as if it could only come from glass. The building, then — if building, after all, it was — could, at least, not be a barn, much less an abandoned one, stale hay ten years musting in it. No; if aught built by mortal, it must be a cottage; perhaps long vacant and dismantled, but this very spring magically fitted up and glazed.

Again, one noon, in the same direction, I marked, over dimmed tops of terraced foliage, a broader gleam, as of a silver buckler held sunwards over some croucher's head; which gleam, experience in like cases taught, must come from a roof newly shingled. This, to me, made pretty sure the recent occupancy of that far cot in fairyland.

Day after day, now, full of interest in my discovery, what time I could spare from reading the *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and all about Titania, wishfully I gazed off towards the hills; but in vain. Either troops of shadows, and imperial guard, with slow pace and solemn, defiled along the steeps, or, routed by pursuing light, fled broadcast from east to west — old wars of Lucifer and Michael; or the mountains, though unvexed by these mirrored sham fights in the sky, had an atmosphere otherwise unfavorable for fairy views. I was sorry, the more so because I had to keep my chamber for some time after — which chamber did not face those hills.

At length, when pretty well again, and sitting out in the September morning upon the piazza and thinking to myself, when, just after a little flock of sheep, the farmer's banded children passed, a-nutting, and said, "How sweet a day" — it was, after all, but what their fathers call a weather-breeder — and, indeed, was become so sensitive through my illness as that I could not bear to look upon a Chinese creeper of my adoption, and which, to my delight, climbing a post of the piazza, had burst out in starry bloom, but now, if you removed the leaves a little, showed millions of strange, cankerous worms, which, feeding upon those blossoms, so shared their blessed hue as to make it unblessed evermore — worms whose germs had doubtless lurked in the very bulb which, so hopefully, I had planted: in this ingrate peevishness of my weary convalescence was I sitting there, when, suddenly looking off, I saw the golden mountain window, dazzling like a deep-sea dolphin. Fairies there, thought I, once more, the queen of fairies at her fairy-window, at any rate, some glad mountain girl; it will do me good, it will cure this weariness, to look on her. No more; I'll launch my yawl — ho, cheerly, heart! — and push away for fairyland, for rainbow's end, in fairyland.

How to get to fairyland, by what road, I did not know, nor could any one inform me, not even one Edmund Spenser, who had been there — so he wrote me — further than that to reach fairyland it must be voyaged to, and with faith. I took the fairy-mountain's bearings, and the first fine day, when strength permitted, got into my yawl — high-pommeled, leather one — cast off the fast, and away I sailed, free voyager as an autumn leaf. Early dawn, and, sallying westward, I sowed the morning before me.

Some miles brought me nigh the hills, but out of present sight of them. I was not lost, for roadside goldenrods, as guideposts, pointed, I doubted not, the way to the golden window. Following them, I came to a lone and languid region, where the grass-grown ways were traveled but by drowsy cattle, that, less waked than stirred by day, seemed to walk in sleep. Browse they did not — the enchanted never eat. At least, so says Don Quixote, that sagest sage that ever lived.

On I went, and gained at least the fairy-mountain's base, but saw yet no fairy ring. A pasture rose before me. Letting down five moldering bars — so moistly green they seemed fished up from some sunken wreck — a

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wigged old Aries, long-visaged and with crumpled horn, came snuffing up, and then, retreating, decorously led on along a milky-way of whiteweed, past dim-clustering Pleiades and Hyades, of small forget-me-nots, and would have led me further still his astral path but for golden flights of yellowbirds — pilots, surely, to the golden window, to one side flying before me, from bush to bush, toward deep woods — which woods themselves were luring — and, somehow, lured, too, by their fence, banning a dark road, which, however dark, led up. I pushed through, when Aries, renouncing me now for some lost soul, wheeled, and went his wiser way. Forbidding and forbidden ground — to him.

A winter wood road, matted all along with wintergreen. By the side of pebbly waters — waters the cheerier for their solitude; beneath swaying fir boughs, petted by no season but still green in all, on I journeyed — my horse and I; on, by an old sawmill bound down and hushed with vines that his grating voice no more was heard; on, by a deep flume clove through snowy marble, vernal-tinted, where fresh eddies had, on each side, spun out empty chapels in the living rock; on, where Jacks-in-the-pulpit like their Baptist namesake, preached but to the wilderness; on, where a huge cross-grain block, fern-bedded, showed where, in forgotten times, man after man had tried to split it, but lost his wedges for his pains — which wedges yet rusted in their holes; on, where, ages past, in steplike ledges of a cascade, skull-hollow pots had been churned out by ceaseless whirling of a flintstone — ever wearing, but itself unworn; on, by wild rapids pouring into a secret pool, but, soothed by circling there awhile, issued forth serenely; on, to less broken ground and by a little ring, where, truly, fairies must have danced, or else some wheel-tire been heated — for all was bare; still on, and up, and out into a hanging orchard, where maidenly looked down upon me a crescent moon, from morning.

My horse hitched low his head. Red apples rolled before him — Eve's apples, seek-no-further. He tasted one, I another; it tasted of the ground. Fairyland not yet, thought I, flinging my bridle to a humped old tree, that crooked out an arm to catch it. For the way now lay where path was none, and none might go but by himself, and only go by daring. Through blackberry brakes that tried to pluck me back, though I but strained toward fruitless growths of mountain laurel, up slippery steps to barren heights, where stood none to welcome. Fairyland not yet, thought I, though the morning is here before me.

Footsore enough and weary, I gained not then my journey's end, but came erelong to a craggy pass, dipping towards growing regions still beyond. A zigzag road, half overgrown with blueberry bushes, here turned among the cliffs. A rent was in their ragged sides; through it a little track branched off, which, upwards threading that short defile, came breezily out above, to where the mountaintop, part sheltered northward by a taller brother, sloped gently off a space ere darkly plunging; and here, among fantastic rocks, reposing in a herd, the foot track wound, half beaten, up to a little, low-storied, grayish cottage, capped, nunlike, with a peaked roof.

On one slope the roof was deeply weather-stained, and, nigh the turfy eaves-trough, all velvet-napped; no doubt the snail-monks founded mossy priories there. The other slope was newly shingled. On the north side, doorless and windowless, the clapboards, innocent of paint, were yet green as the north side of lichened pines, or copperless hulls of Japanese junks becalmed. The whole base, like those of the neighboring rocks, was rimmed about with shaded streaks of richest sod; for, with hearthstones in fairyland, the natural rock, though housed, preserves to the last, just as in open fields, its fertilizing charm; only, by necessity, working now at a remove, to the sward without. So, at least, says Oberon, grave authority in fairy lore. Though, setting Oberon aside, certain it is that, even in the common world, the soil close up to farmhouses, as close up to pasture rocks, is, even though untended, ever richer than it is a few rods off — such gentle, nurturing heat is radiated there.

But with this cottage the shaded streaks were richest in its front and about its entrance, where the groundsill, and especially the doorsill, had, through long eld, quietly settled down.

No fence was seen, no inclosure. Near by — ferns, ferns, ferns; further — woods, woods, woods; beyond — mountains, mountains, mountains; then — sky, sky, sky. Turned out in aerial commons, pasture for the mountain moon. Nature, and but nature, house and all; even a low cross-pile of silver birch, piled openly, to season; up among whose silvery sticks, as through the fencing of some sequestered grave, sprang vagrant raspberry bushes — willful assertors of their right of way.

The foot track, so dainty narrow, just like a sheep track, led through long ferns that lodged. Fairyland at last, thought I; Una and her lamb dwell here. Truly, a small abode — mere palanquin, set down on the summit, in a pass between two worlds, participant of neither.

A sultry hour, and I wore a light hat, of yellow sinnet, with white duck trousers — both relics of my tropic



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seagoing. Clogged in the muffling ferns, I softly stumbled, staining the knees a sea green.

Pausing at the threshold, or rather where threshold once had been, I saw, through the open doorway, a lonely girl, sewing at a lonely window. A pale-cheeked girl and fly-specked window, with wasps about the mended upper panes. I spoke. She shyly started, like some Tahiti girl, secreted for a sacrifice, first catching sight, through palms, of Captain Cook. Recovering, she bade me enter; with her apron brushed off a stool; then silently resumed her own. With thanks I took the stool, but now, for a space, I, too, was mute. This, then, is the fairy-mountain house, and here the fairy queen sitting at her fairy-window.

I went up to it. Downwards, directed by the tunneled pass, as through a leveled telescope, I caught sight of a-far-off, soft, azure world. I hardly knew it, though I came from it.

"You must find this view very pleasant," said I, at last.

"Oh, sir," tears starting in her eyes, "the first time I looked out of this window, I said 'never, never shall I weary of this.'"

"And what wearies you of it now?"

"I don't know," while a tear fell; "but it is not the view, it is Marianna."

Some months back, her brother, only seventeen, had come hither, a long way from the other side, to cut wood and burn coal, and she, elder sister, had accompanied him. Long had they been orphans, and now sole inhabitants of the sole house upon the mountain. No guest came, no traveler passed. The zigzag, perilous road was only used at seasons by the coal wagons. The brother was absent the entire day, sometimes the entire night. When, at evening, fagged out, he did come home, he soon left his bench, poor fellow, for his bed, just as one, at last, wearily quits that, too, for still deeper rest. The bench, the bed, the grave.

Silent I stood by the fairy-window, while these things were being told.

"Do you know," said she at last, as stealing from her story, "do you know who lives yonder? — I have never been down into that country — away off there, I mean; that house, that marble one," pointing far across the lower landscape; "have you not caught it? there, on the long hillside: the field before, the woods behind; the white shines out against their blue; don't you mark it? the only house in sight."

I looked, and, after a time, to my surprise, recognized, more by its position than its aspect or Marianna's description, my own abode, glimmering much like this mountain one from the piazza. The mirage haze made it appear less a farmhouse than King Charming's palace.

"I have often wondered who lives there; but it must be some happy one; again this morning was I thinking so."

"Some happy one," returned I, starting; "and why do you think that? You judge some rich one lives there?"

"Rich or not, I never thought, but it looks so happy, I can't tell how, and it is so far away. Sometimes I think I do but dream it is there. You should see it in a sunset."

"No doubt the sunset gilds it finely, but not more than the sunrise does this house, perhaps."

"This house? The sun is a good sun, but it never gilds this house. Why should it? This old house is rotting. That makes it so mossy. In the morning, the sun comes in at this old window, to be sure — boarded up, when first we came; a window I can't keep clean, do what I may — and half burns, and nearly blinds me at my sewing, besides setting the flies and wasps astir — such flies and wasps as only lone mountain houses know. See, here is the curtain — this apron — I try to shut it out with then. It fades it, you see. Sun gild this house? not that ever Marianna saw."

"Because when this roof is gilded most, then you stay here within."

"The hottest, weariest hour of day, you mean? Sir, the sun gilds not this roof. It leaked so, brother newly shingled all one side. Did you not see it? The north side, where the sun strikes most on what the rain has wetted. The sun is a good sun, but this roof, it first scorches, and then rots. An old house. They went West, and are long dead, they say, who built it. A mountain house. In winter no fox could den in it. That chimney-place has been blocked up with snow, just like a hollow stump."

"Yours are strange fancies, Marianna."

"They but reflect the things."

"Then I should have said, 'These are strange things,' rather than, 'Yours are strange fancies.'"

"As you will," and took up her sewing.

Something in those quiet words, or in that quiet act, it made me mute again; while, noting through the fairy-window a broad shadow stealing on, as cast by some gigantic condor floating at brooding poise on

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outstretched wings. I marked how, by its deeper and inclusive dusk, it wiped away into itself all lesser shades of rock or fern.

"You watch the cloud," said Marianna.

"No, a shadow; a cloud's, no doubt — though that I cannot see. How did you know it? Your eyes are on your work."

It dusked my work. There, now the cloud is gone, Tray Comes back."

"How?"

"The dog, the shaggy dog. At noon, he steals off, of himself, to change his shape — returns, and lies down awhile, nigh the door. Don't you see him? His head is turned round at you, though when you came he looked before him."

"Your eyes rest but on your work; what do you speak of?"

"By the window, crossing."

"You mean this shaggy shadow — the nigh one? And, yes, now that I mark it, it is not unlike a large, black Newfoundland dog. The invading shadow gone, the invaded one returns. But I do not see what casts it."

"For that, you must go without."

"One of those grassy rocks, no doubt."

"You see his head, his face?"

"The shadow's? You speak as if you saw it, and all the time your eyes are on your work."

"Tray looks at you," still without glancing up; "this is his house; I see him."

"Have you, then, so long sat at this mountain window, where but clouds and vapors pass, that to you shadows are as things, though you speak of them as of phantoms; that, by familiar knowledge working like a second sight, you can, without looking for them, tell just where they are, though, as having mice-like feet, they creep about, and come and go; that to you these lifeless shadows are as living friends, who, though out of sight, are not out of mind, even in their faces — is it so?"

"That way I never thought of it. But the friendliest one, that used to soothe my weariness so much, coolly quivering on the ferns, it was taken from me, never to return, as Tray did just now. The shadow of a birch. The tree was struck by lightning, and brother cut it up. you saw the cross-pile outdoors — the buried root lies under it, but not the shadow. That is flown, and never will come back, nor ever anywhere stir again."

Another cloud here stole along, once more blotting out the dog, and blackening all the mountain; while the stillness was so still deafness might have forgot itself, or else believed that noiseless shadow spoke.

"Birds, Marianna, singing birds, I hear none; I hear nothing. Boys and bobolinks, do they never come a-berrying up here?"

"Birds I seldom hear; boys, never. The berries mostly ripe and fall — few but me the wiser."

"But yellowbirds showed me the way — part way, at least."

"And then flew back. I guess they play about the mountainside but don't make the top their home. And no doubt you think that, living so lonesome here, knowing nothing, hearing nothing — little, at least, but sound of thunder and the fall of trees — never reading, seldom speaking, yet ever wakeful, this is what gives me my strange thoughts — for so you call them — this weariness and wakefulness together. Brother, who stands and works in open air, would I could rest like him; but mine is mostly but dull woman's work — sitting, sitting, restless sitting."

"But do you not go walk at times? These woods are wide."

"And lonesome; lonesome, because so wide. Sometimes, 'tis true, of afternoons, I go a little way, but soon come back again. Better feel lone by hearth than rock. The shadows hereabouts I know — those in the woods are strangers."

"But the night?"

"Just like the day. Thinking, thinking — a wheel I cannot stop; pure want of sleep it is that turns it."

"I have heard that, for this wakeful weariness, to say one's prayers, and then lay one's head upon a fresh hop pillow —"

"Look!"

Through the fairy-window, she pointed down the steep to a small garden patch near by — mere pot of rifled loam, half rounded in by sheltering rocks — where, side by side, some feet apart, nipped and puny, two hopvines

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climbed two poles, and, gaining their tip ends, would have then joined over in an upward clasp, but the baffled shoots, groping awhile in empty air, trailed back whence they sprung.

"You have tried the pillow, then?"

"Yes."

"And prayer?"

"Prayer and pillow."

"Is there no other cure, or charm?"

"Oh, if I could but once get to yonder house, and but look upon whoever the happy being is that lives there! A foolish thought: why do I think it? Is it that I live so lonesome, and know nothing?"

"I, too, know nothing, and therefore cannot answer; but for your sake, Marianna, well could wish that I were that happy one of the happy house you dream you see; for then you would behold him now, and, as you say, this weariness might leave you."

Enough. Launching my yawl no more for fairyland, I stick to the piazza. It is my box—royal, and this amphitheater, my theater of San Carlo. Yes, the scenery is magical — the illusion so complete. And Madam Meadow Lark, my prima donna, plays her grand engagement here; and, drinking in her sunrise note, which, Memnon—like, seems struck from the golden window, how far from me the weary face behind it.

But every night when the curtain falls, truth comes in with darkness. No light shows from the mountain. To and fro I walk the piazza deck, haunted by Marianna's face, and many as real a story.