THOMAS HARDY

THE WELL-BELOVED: A SKETCH OF A TEMPERAMENT

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Содержание

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PREFACE

The peninsula carved by Time out of a single stone, whereon most of the following scenes are laid, has been for centuries immemorial the home of a curious and well-nigh distinct people, cherishing strange beliefs and singular customs, now for the most part obsolescent. Fancies, like certain soft-wooded plants which cannot bear the silent inland frosts, but thrive by the sea in the roughest of weather, seem to grow up naturally here, in particular amongst those natives who have no active concern in the labours of the 'Isle.' Hence it is a spot apt to generate a type of personage like the character imperfectly sketched in these pages – a native of natives – whom some may choose to call a fantast (if they honour him with their consideration so far), but whom others may see only as one that gave objective continuity and a name to a delicate dream which in a vaguer form is more or less common to all men, and is by no means new to Platonic philosophers.

To those who know the rocky coign of England here depicted – overlooking the great Channel Highway with all its suggestiveness, and standing out so far into mid-sea that touches of the Gulf Stream soften the air till February – it is matter of surprise that the place has not been more frequently chosen as the retreat of artists and poets in search of inspiration – for at least a month or two in the year, the tempestuous rather than the fine seasons by preference. To be sure, one nook therein is the retreat, at their country's expense, of other geniuses from a distance; but their presence is hardly discoverable. Yet perhaps it is as well that the artistic visitors do not come, or no more would be heard of little freehold houses being bought and sold there for a couple of hundred pounds – built of solid stone, and dating from the sixteenth century and earlier, with mullions, copings, and corbels complete. These transactions, by the way, are carried out and covenanted, or were till lately, in the parish church, in the face of the congregation, such being the ancient custom of the Isle.

As for the story itself, it may be worth while to remark that, differing from all or most others of the series in that the interest aimed at is of an ideal or subjective nature, and frankly imaginative, verisimilitude in the sequence of events has been subordinated to the said aim.

The first publication of this tale in an independent form was in 1897; but it had appeared in the periodical press in 1892, under the title of 'The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved.' A few chapters of that experimental issue were rewritten for the present and final form of the narrative.

T. H. August 1912.

PART FIRST – A YOUNG MAN OF TWENTY

– 'Now, if Time knows
That Her, whose radiant brows
Weave them a garland of my vows;

Her that dares be
What these lines wish to see:
I seek no further, it is She.'

– *R. CRASHAW.*

I. A SUPPOSITITIOUS PRESENTMENT OF HER

A person who differed from the local wayfarers was climbing the steep road which leads through the sea-skirted townlet definable as the Street of Wells, and forms a pass into that Gibraltar of Wessex, the singular peninsula once an island, and still called such, that stretches out like the head of a bird into the English Channel. It is connected with the mainland by a long thin neck of pebbles 'cast up by rages of the se,' and unparalleled in its kind in Europe.

The pedestrian was what he looked like – a young man from London and the cities of the Continent. Nobody could see at present that his urbanism sat upon him only as a garment. He was just recollecting with something of self-reproach that a whole three years and eight months had flown since he paid his last visit to his father at this lonely rock of his birthplace, the intervening time having been spent amid many contrasting societies, peoples, manners, and scenes.

What had seemed usual in the isle when he lived there always looked quaint and odd after his later impressions. More than ever the spot seemed what it was said once to have been, the ancient Vindilia Island, and the Home of the Slingers. The towering rock, the houses above houses, one man's doorstep rising behind his neighbour's chimney, the gardens hung up by one edge to the sky, the vegetables growing on apparently almost vertical planes, the unity of the whole island as a solid and single block of limestone four miles long, were no longer familiar and commonplace ideas. All now stood dazzlingly unique and white against the tinted sea, and the sun flashed on infinitely stratified walls of oolite, with a distinctiveness that called the eyes to it as strongly as any spectacle he had beheld afar.

The melancholy ruins
Of cancelled cycles…

After a laborious clamber he reached the top, and walked along the plateau towards the eastern village. The time being about two o'clock, in the middle of the summer season, the road was glaring and dusty, and drawing near to his father's house he sat down in the sun.

He stretched out his hand upon the rock beside him. It felt warm. That was the island's personal temperature when in its afternoon sleep as now. He listened, and heard sounds: whirr-whirr, saw-saw-saw. Those were the island's snores – the noises of the quarrymen and stone-sawyers.

Opposite to the spot on which he sat was a roomy cottage or homestead. Like the island it was all of stone, not only in walls but in window-frames, roof, chimneys, fence, stile, pigsty and stable, almost door.

He remembered who had used to live there – and probably lived there now – the Caro family; the 'roan-mare' Caros, as they were called to distinguish them from other branches of the same pedigree, there being but half-a-dozen Christian and surnames in the whole island. He crossed the road and looked in at the open doorway. Yes, there they were still.

Mrs. Caro, who had seen him from the window, met him in the entry, and an old-fashioned greeting took place between them. A moment after a door leading from the back rooms was thrown open, and a young girl about seventeen or eighteen came bounding in.

'Why, 'TIS dear Joce!' she burst out joyfully. And running up to the young man, she kissed him.

The demonstration was sweet enough from the owner of such an affectionate pair of bright hazel eyes and brown tresses of hair. But it was so sudden, so unexpected by a man fresh from towns, that he winced for a moment quite involuntarily; and there was some constraint in the manner in which he returned her kiss, and said, 'My pretty little Avice, how do you do after so long?'

For a few seconds her impulsive innocence hardly noticed his start of surprise; but Mrs. Caro, the girl's mother, had observed it instantly. With a pained flush she turned to her daughter.

'Avice – my dear Avice! Why – what are you doing? Don't you know that you've grown up to be a woman since Jocelyn – Mr. Pierston – was last down here? Of course you mustn't do now as you used to do three or four years ago!'

The awkwardness which had arisen was hardly removed by Pierston's assurance that he quite expected her to keep up the practice of her childhood, followed by several minutes of conversation on general subjects. He was vexed from his soul that his unaware movement should so have betrayed him. At his leaving he repeated that if Avice regarded him otherwise than as she used to do he would never forgive her; but though they parted good friends her regret at the incident was visible in her face. Jocelyn passed out into the road and onward to his father's house hard by. The mother and daughter were left alone.

'I was quite amazed at 'ee, my child!' exclaimed the elder. 'A young man from London and foreign cities, used now to the strictest company manners, and ladies who almost think it vulgar to smile broad! How could ye do it, Avice?'

'I – I didn't think about how I was altered!' said the conscience-stricken girl. 'I used to kiss him, and he used to kiss me before he went away.'

'But that was years ago, my dear!'

'O yes, and for the moment I forgot! He seemed just the same to me as he used to be.'

'Well, it can't be helped now. You must be careful in the future. He's got lots of young women, I'll warrant, and has few thoughts left for you. He's what they call a sculptor, and he means to be a great genius in that line some day, they do say.'

'Well, I've done it; and it can't be mended!' moaned the girl.

Meanwhile Jocelyn Pierston, the sculptor of budding fame, had gone onward to the house of his father, an inartistic man of trade and commerce merely, from whom, nevertheless, Jocelyn condescended to accept a yearly allowance pending the famous days to come. But the elder, having received no warning of his son's intended visit, was not at home to receive him. Jocelyn looked round the familiar premises, glanced across the Common at the great yards within which eternal saws were going to and fro upon eternal blocks of stone – the very same saws and the very same blocks that he had seen there when last in the island, so it seemed to him – and then passed through the dwelling into the back garden.

Like all the gardens in the isle it was surrounded by a wall of dry-jointed spawls, and at its further extremity it ran out into a corner, which adjoined the garden of the Caros. He had no sooner reached this spot than he became aware of a murmuring and sobbing on the other side of the wall. The voice he recognized in a moment as Avice's, and she seemed to be confiding her trouble to some young friend of her own sex.

'Oh, what shall I DO! what SHALL I do!' she was saying bitterly. 'So bold as it was – so shameless! How could I think of such a thing! He will never forgive me – never, never like me again! He'll think me a forward hussy, and yet – and yet I quite forgot how much I had grown. But that he'll never believe!' The accents were those of one who had for the first time become conscious of her womanhood, as an unwonted possession which shamed and frightened her.

'Did he seem angry at it?' inquired the friend.

'O no – not angry! Worse. Cold and haughty. O, he's such a fashionable person now – not at all an island man. But there's no use in talking of it. I wish I was dead!'

Pierston retreated as quickly as he could. He grieved at the incident which had brought such pain to this innocent soul; and yet it was beginning to be a source of vague pleasure to him. He returned to the house, and when his father had come back and welcomed him, and they had shared a meal together, Jocelyn again went out, full of an earnest desire to soothe his young neighbour's sorrow in a way she little expected; though, to tell the truth, his affection for her was rather that of a friend than of a lover, and he felt by no means sure that the migratory, elusive idealization he called his Love

who, ever since his boyhood, had flitted from human shell to human shell an indefinite number of times, was going to take up her abode in the body of Avice Caro.

II. THE INCARNATION IS ASSUMED TO BE TRUE

It was difficult to meet her again, even though on this lump of rock the difficulty lay as a rule rather in avoidance than in meeting. But Avice had been transformed into a very different kind of young woman by the self-consciousness engendered of her impulsive greeting, and, notwithstanding their near neighbourhood, he could not encounter her, try as he would. No sooner did he appear an inch beyond his father's door than she was to earth like a fox; she bolted upstairs to her room.

Anxious to soothe her after his unintentional slight he could not stand these evasions long. The manners of the isle were primitive and straightforward, even among the well-to-do, and noting her disappearance one day he followed her into the house and onward to the foot of the stairs.

'Avice!' he called.

'Yes, Mr. Pierston.'

'Why do you run upstairs like that?'

'Oh – only because I wanted to come up for something.'

'Well, if you've got it, can't you come down again?'

'No, I can't very well.'

'Come, DEAR Avice. That's what you are, you know.'

There was no response.

'Well, if you won't, you won't!' he continued. 'I don't want to bother you.' And Pierston went away.

He was stopping to look at the old-fashioned flowers under the garden walls when he heard a voice behind him.

'Mr. Pierston – I wasn't angry with you. When you were gone I thought – you might mistake me, and I felt I could do no less than come and assure you of my friendship still.'

Turning he saw the blushing Avice immediately behind him.

'You are a good, dear girl!' said he, and, seizing her hand, set upon her cheek the kind of kiss that should have been the response to hers on the day of his coming.

'Darling Avice, forgive me for the slight that day! Say you do. Come, now! And then I'll say to you what I have never said to any other woman, living or dead: "Will you have me as your husband?"'

'Ah! – mother says I am only one of many!'

'You are not, dear. You knew me when I was young, and others didn't.'

Somehow or other her objections were got over, and though she did not give an immediate assent, she agreed to meet him later in the afternoon, when she walked with him to the southern point of the island called the Beal, or, by strangers, the Bill, pausing over the treacherous cavern known as Cave Hole, into which the sea roared and splashed now as it had done when they visited it together as children. To steady herself while looking in he offered her his arm, and she took it, for the first time as a woman, for the hundredth time as his companion.

They rambled on to the lighthouse, where they would have lingered longer if Avice had not suddenly remembered an engagement to recite poetry from a platform that very evening at the Street of Wells, the village commanding the entrance to the island – the village that has now advanced to be a town.

'Recite!' said he. 'Who'd have thought anybody or anything could recite down here except the reciter we hear away there – the never speechless sea.'

'O but we are quite intellectual now. In the winter particularly. But, Jocelyn – don't come to the recitation, will you? It would spoil my performance if you were there, and I want to be as good as the rest.'

'I won't if you really wish me not to. But I shall meet you at the door and bring you home.'

'Yes!' she said, looking up into his face. Avice was perfectly happy now; she could never have believed on that mortifying day of his coming that she would be so happy with him. When they reached the east side of the isle they parted, that she might be soon enough to take her place on the platform. Pierston went home, and after dark, when it was about the hour for accompanying her back, he went along the middle road northward to the Street of Wells.

He was full of misgiving. He had known Avice Caro so well of old that his feeling for her now was rather comradeship than love; and what he had said to her in a moment of impulse that morning rather appalled him in its consequences. Not that any of the more sophisticated and accomplished women who had attracted him successively would be likely to rise inconveniently between them. For he had quite disabused his mind of the assumption that the idol of his fancy was an integral part of the personality in which it had sojourned for a long or a short while.

* * *

To his Well-Beloved he had always been faithful; but she had had many embodiments. Each individuality known as Lucy, Jane, Flora, Evangeline, or what-not, had been merely a transient condition of her. He did not recognize this as an excuse or as a defence, but as a fact simply. Essentially she was perhaps of no tangible substance; a spirit, a dream, a frenzy, a conception, an aroma, an epitomized sex, a light of the eye, a parting of the lips. God only knew what she really was; Pierston did not. She was indescribable.

Never much considering that she was a subjective phenomenon vivified by the weird influences of his descent and birthplace, the discovery of her ghostliness, of her independence of physical laws and failings, had occasionally given him a sense of fear. He never knew where she next would be, whither she would lead him, having herself instant access to all ranks and classes, to every abode of men. Sometimes at night he dreamt that she was 'the wile-weaving Daughter of high Zeus' in person, bent on tormenting him for his sins against her beauty in his art – the implacable Aphrodite herself indeed. He knew that he loved the masquerading creature wherever he found her, whether with blue eyes, black eyes, or brown; whether presenting herself as tall, fragile, or plump. She was never in two places at once; but hitherto she had never been in one place long.

By making this clear to his mind some time before to-day, he had escaped a good deal of ugly self-reproach. It was simply that she who always attracted him, and led him whither she would as by a silken thread, had not remained the occupant of the same fleshly tabernacle in her career so far. Whether she would ultimately settle down to one he could not say.

Had he felt that she was becoming manifest in Avice, he would have tried to believe that this was the terminal spot of her migrations, and have been content to abide by his words. But did he see the Well-Beloved in Avice at all? The question was somewhat disturbing.

He had reached the brow of the hill, and descended towards the village, where in the long straight Roman street he soon found the lighted hall. The performance was not yet over; and by going round to the side of the building and standing on a mound he could see the interior as far down as the platform level. Avice's turn, or second turn, came on almost immediately. Her pretty embarrassment on facing the audience rather won him away from his doubts. She was, in truth, what is called a 'nice' girl; attractive, certainly, but above all things nice – one of the class with whom the risks of matrimony approximate most nearly to zero. Her intelligent eyes, her broad forehead, her thoughtful carriage, ensured one thing, that of all the girls he had known he had never met one with more charming and solid qualities than Avice Caro's. This was not a mere conjecture – he had known her long and thoroughly; her every mood and temper.

A heavy wagon passing without drowned her small soft voice for him; but the audience were pleased, and she blushed at their applause. He now took his station at the door, and when the people had done pouring out he found her within awaiting him.

They climbed homeward slowly by the Old Road, Pierston dragging himself up the steep by the wayside hand-rail and pulling Avice after him upon his arm. At the top they turned and stood still. To the left of them the sky was streaked like a fan with the lighthouse rays, and under their front, at periods of a quarter of a minute, there arose a deep, hollow stroke like the single beat of a drum, the intervals being filled with a long-drawn rattling, as of bones between huge canine jaws. It came from the vast concave of Deadman's Bay, rising and falling against the pebble dyke.

The evening and night winds here were, to Pierston's mind, charged with a something that did not burden them elsewhere. They brought it up from that sinister Bay to the west, whose movement she and he were hearing now. It was a presence – an imaginary shape or essence from the human multitude lying below: those who had gone down in vessels of war, East Indiamen, barges, brigs, and ships of the Armada – select people, common, and debased, whose interests and hopes had been as wide asunder as the poles, but who had rolled each other to oneness on that restless sea-bed. There could almost be felt the brush of their huge composite ghost as it ran a shapeless figure over the isle, shrieking for some good god who would disunite it again.

The twain wandered a long way that night amid these influences – so far as to the old Hope Churchyard, which lay in a ravine formed by a landslip ages ago. The church had slipped down with the rest of the cliff, and had long been a ruin. It seemed to say that in this last local stronghold of the Pagan divinities, where Pagan customs lingered yet, Christianity had established itself precariously at best. In that solemn spot Pierston kissed her.

The kiss was by no means on Avice's initiative this time. Her former demonstrativeness seemed to have increased her present reserve.

* * *

That day was the beginning of a pleasant month passed mainly in each other's society. He found that she could not only recite poetry at intellectual gatherings, but play the piano fairly, and sing to her own accompaniment.

He observed that every aim of those who had brought her up had been to get her away mentally as far as possible from her natural and individual life as an inhabitant of a peculiar island: to make her an exact copy of tens of thousands of other people, in whose circumstances there was nothing special, distinctive, or picturesque; to teach her to forget all the experiences of her ancestors; to drown the local ballads by songs purchased at the Budmouth fashionable music-sellers', and the local vocabulary by a governess-tongue of no country at all. She lived in a house that would have been the fortune of an artist, and learnt to draw London suburban villas from printed copies.

Avice had seen all this before he pointed it out, but, with a girl's tractability, had acquiesced. By constitution she was local to the bone, but she could not escape the tendency of the age.

The time for Jocelyn's departure drew near, and she looked forward to it sadly, but serenely, their engagement being now a settled thing. Pierston thought of the native custom on such occasions, which had prevailed in his and her family for centuries, both being of the old stock of the isle. The influx of 'kimberlins,' or 'foreigners' (as strangers from the mainland of Wessex were called), had led in a large measure to its discontinuance; but underneath the veneer of Avice's education many an old-fashioned idea lay slumbering, and he wondered if, in her natural melancholy at his leaving, she regretted the changing manners which made unpopular the formal ratification of a betrothal, according to the precedent of their sires and grandsires.

III. THE APPOINTMENT

'Well,' said he, 'here we are, arrived at the fag-end of my holiday. What a pleasant surprise my old home, which I have not thought worth coming to see for three or four years, had in store for me!'

'You must go to-morrow?' she asked uneasily.

'Yes.'

Something seemed to overweigh them; something more than the natural sadness of a parting which was not to be long; and he decided that instead of leaving in the daytime as he had intended, he would defer his departure till night, and go by the mail-train from Budmouth. This would give him time to look into his father's quarries, and enable her, if she chose, to walk with him along the beach as far as to Henry the Eighth's Castle above the sands, where they could linger and watch the moon rise over the sea. She said she thought she could come.

So after spending the next day with his father in the quarries Jocelyn prepared to leave, and at the time appointed set out from the stone house of his birth in this stone isle to walk to Budmouth-Regis by the path along the beach, Avice having some time earlier gone down to see some friends in the Street of Wells, which was halfway towards the spot of their tryst. The descent soon brought him to the pebble bank, and leaving behind him the last houses of the isle, and the ruins of the village destroyed by the November gale of 1824, he struck out along the narrow thread of land. When he had walked a hundred yards he stopped, turned aside to the pebble ridge which walled out the sea, and sat down to wait for her.

Between him and the lights of the ships riding at anchor in the roadstead two men passed slowly in the direction he intended to pursue. One of them recognized Jocelyn, and bade him good-night, adding, 'Wish you joy, sir, of your choice, and hope the wedden will be soon!'

'Thank you, Seaborn. Well – we shall see what Christmas will do towards bringing it about.'

'My wife opened upon it this mornen: "Please God, I'll up and see that there wedden," says she, "knowing 'em both from their crawling days."'

The men moved on, and when they were out of Pierston's hearing the one who had not spoken said to his friend, 'Who was that young kimberlin? He don't seem one o' we.'

'Oh, he is, though, every inch o' en. He's Mr. Jocelyn Pierston, the stwone-merchant's only son up at East Quarriers. He's to be married to a stylish young body; her mother, a widow woman, carries on the same business as well as she can; but their trade is not a twentieth part of Pierston's. He's worth thousands and thousands, they say, though 'a do live on in the same wold way up in the same wold house. This son is doen great things in London as a' image-carver; and I can mind when, as a boy, 'a first took to carving soldiers out o' bits o' stwone from the soft-bed of his father's quarries; and then 'a made a set o' stwonen chess-men, and so 'a got on. He's quite the gent in London, they tell me; and the wonder is that 'a cared to come back here and pick up little Avice Caro – nice maid as she is notwithstanding… Hullo! there's to be a change in the weather soon.'

Meanwhile the subject of their remarks waited at the appointed place till seven o'clock, the hour named between himself and his affianced, had struck. Almost at the moment he saw a figure coming forward from the last lamp at the bottom of the hill. But the figure speedily resolved itself into that of a boy, who, advancing to Jocelyn, inquired if he were Mr. Pierston, and handed him a note.

IV. A LONELY PEDESTRIAN

When the boy had gone Jocelyn retraced his steps to the last lamp, and read, in Avice's hand:

'MY DEAREST, – I shall be sorry if I grieve you at all in what I am going to say about our arrangement to meet to-night in the Sandsfoot ruin. But I have fancied that my seeing you again and again lately is inclining your father to insist, and you as his heir to feel, that we ought to carry out Island Custom in our courting – your people being such old inhabitants in an unbroken line. Truth to say, mother supposes that your father, for natural reasons, may have hinted to you that we ought. Now, the thing is contrary to my feelings: it is nearly left off; and I do not think it good, even where there is property, as in your case, to justify it, in a measure. I would rather trust in Providence.

'On the whole, therefore, it is best that I should not come – if only for appearances – and meet you at a time and place suggesting the custom, to others than ourselves, at least, if known.

'I am sure that this decision will not disturb you much; that you will understand my modern feelings, and think no worse of me for them. And dear, if it were to be done, and we were unfortunate in it, we might both have enough old family feeling to think, like our forefathers, and possibly your father, that we could not marry honourably; and hence we might be made unhappy.

'However, you will come again shortly, will you not, dear Jocelyn? – and then the time will soon draw on when no more good-byes will be required. – Always and ever yours,

'AVICE.'

Jocelyn, having read the letter, was surprised at the naivete it showed, and at Avice and her mother's antiquated simplicity in supposing that to be still a grave and operating principle which was a bygone barbarism to himself and other absentees from the island. His father, as a money-maker, might have practical wishes on the matter of descendants which lent plausibility to the conjecture of Avice and her mother; but to Jocelyn he had never expressed himself in favour of the ancient ways, old-fashioned as he was.

Amused therefore at her regard of herself as modern, Jocelyn was disappointed, and a little vexed, that such an unforeseen reason should have deprived him of her company. How the old ideas survived under the new education!

The reader is asked to remember that the date, though recent in the history of the Isle of Slingers, was more than forty years ago.

* * *

Finding that the evening seemed louring, yet indisposed to go back and hire a vehicle, he went on quickly alone. In such an exposed spot the night wind was gusty, and the sea behind the pebble barrier kicked and flounced in complex rhythms, which could be translated equally well as shocks of battle or shouts of thanksgiving.

Presently on the pale road before him he discerned a figure, the figure of a woman. He remembered that a woman passed him while he was reading Avice's letter by the last lamp, and now he was overtaking her.

He did hope for a moment that it might be Avice, with a changed mind. But it was not she, nor anybody like her. It was a taller, squarer form than that of his betrothed, and although the season was only autumn she was wrapped in furs, or in thick and heavy clothing of some kind.

He soon advanced abreast of her, and could get glimpses of her profile against the roadstead lights. It was dignified, arresting, that of a very Juno. Nothing more classical had he ever seen. She walked at a swinging pace, yet with such ease and power that there was but little difference in their rate of speed for several minutes; and during this time he regarded and conjectured. However, he was about to pass her by when she suddenly turned and addressed him.

'Mr Pierston, I think, of East Quarriers?'

He assented, and could just discern what a handsome, commanding, imperious face it was – quite of a piece with the proud tones of her voice. She was a new type altogether in his experience; and her accent was not so local as Avice's.

'Can you tell me the time, please?'

He looked at his watch by the aid of a light, and in telling her that it was a quarter past seven observed, by the momentary gleam of his match, that her eyes looked a little red and chafed, as if with weeping.

'Mr. Pierston, will you forgive what will appear very strange to you, I dare say? That is, may I ask you to lend me some money for a day or two? I have been so foolish as to leave my purse on the dressing-table.'

It did appear strange: and yet there were features in the young lady's personality which assured him in a moment that she was not an impostor. He yielded to her request, and put his hand in his pocket. Here it remained for a moment. How much did she mean by the words 'some money'? The Junonian quality of her form and manner made him throw himself by an impulse into harmony with her, and he responded regally. He scented a romance. He handed her five pounds.

His munificence caused her no apparent surprise. 'It is quite enough, thank you,' she remarked quietly, as he announced the sum, lest she should be unable to see it for herself.

While overtaking and conversing with her he had not observed that the rising wind, which had proceeded from puffing to growling, and from growling to screeching, with the accustomed suddenness of its changes here, had at length brought what it promised by these vagaries – rain. The drops, which had at first hit their left cheeks like the pellets of a popgun, soon assumed the character of a raking fusillade from the bank adjoining, one shot of which was sufficiently smart to go through Jocelyn's sleeve. The tall girl turned, and seemed to be somewhat concerned at an onset which she had plainly not foreseen before her starting.

'We must take shelter,' said Jocelyn.

'But where?' said she.

To windward was the long, monotonous bank, too obtusely piled to afford a screen, over which they could hear the canine crunching of pebbles by the sea without; on their right stretched the inner bay or roadstead, the distant riding-lights of the ships now dim and glimmering; behind them a faint spark here and there in the lower sky showed where the island rose; before there was nothing definite, and could be nothing, till they reached a precarious wood bridge, a mile further on, Henry the Eighth's Castle being a little further still.

But just within the summit of the bank, whither it had apparently been hauled to be out of the way of the waves, was one of the local boats called lerrets, bottom upwards. As soon as they saw it the pair ran up the pebbly slope towards it by a simultaneous impulse. They then perceived that it had lain there a long time, and were comforted to find it capable of affording more protection than anybody would have expected from a distant view. It formed a shelter or store for the fishermen, the bottom of the lerret being tarred as a roof. By creeping under the bows, which overhung the bank on props to leeward, they made their way within, where, upon some thwarts, oars, and other fragmentary woodwork, lay a mass of dry netting – a whole sein. Upon this they scrambled and sat down, through inability to stand upright.

V. A CHARGE

The rain fell upon the keel of the old lerret like corn thrown in handfuls by some colossal sower, and darkness set in to its full shade.

They crouched so close to each other that he could feel her furs against him. Neither had spoken since they left the roadway till she said, with attempted unconcern: 'This is unfortunate.'

He admitted that it was, and found, after a few further remarks had passed, that she certainly had been weeping, there being a suppressed gasp of passionateness in her utterance now and then.

'It is more unfortunate for you, perhaps, than for me,' he said, 'and I am very sorry that it should be so.'

She replied nothing to this, and he added that it was rather a desolate place for a woman, alone and afoot. He hoped nothing serious had happened to drag her out at such an untoward time.

At first she seemed not at all disposed to show any candour on her own affairs, and he was left to conjecture as to her history and name, and how she could possibly have known him. But, as the rain gave not the least sign of cessation, he observed: 'I think we shall have to go back.'

'Never!' said she, and the firmness with which she closed her lips was audible in the word.

'Why not?' he inquired.

'There are good reasons.'

'I cannot understand how you should know me, while I have no knowledge of you.'

'Oh, but you know me – about me, at least.'

'Indeed I don't. How should I? You are a kimberlin.'

'I am not. I am a real islander – or was, rather… Haven't you heard of the Best-Bed Stone Company?'

'I should think so! They tried to ruin my father by getting away his trade – or, at least, the founder of the company did – old Bencomb.'

'He's my father!'

'Indeed. I am sorry I should have spoken so disrespectfully of him, for I never knew him personally. After making over his large business to the company, he retired, I believe, to London?'

'Yes. Our house, or rather his, not mine, is at South Kensington. We have lived there for years. But we have been tenants of Sylvania Castle, on the island here, this season. We took it for a month or two of the owner, who is away.'

'Then I have been staying quite near you, Miss Bencomb. My father's is a comparatively humble residence hard by.'

'But he could afford a much bigger one if he chose.'

'You have heard so? I don't know. He doesn't tell me much of his affairs.'

'My father,' she burst out suddenly, 'is always scolding me for my extravagance! And he has been doing it to-day more than ever. He said I go shopping in town to simply a diabolical extent, and exceed my allowance!'

'Was that this evening?'

'Yes. And then it reached such a storm of passion between us that I pretended to retire to my room for the rest of the evening, but I slipped out; and I am never going back home again.'

'What will you do?'

'I shall go first to my aunt in London; and if she won't have me, I'll work for a living. I have left my father for ever! What I should have done if I had not met you I cannot tell – I must have walked all the way to London, I suppose. Now I shall take the train as soon as I reach the mainland.'

'If you ever do in this hurricane.'

'I must sit here till it stops.'

And there on the nets they sat. Pierston knew of old Bencomb as his father's bitterest enemy, who had made a great fortune by swallowing up the small stone-merchants, but had found Jocelyn's sire a trifle too big to digest – the latter being, in fact, the chief rival of the Best-Bed Company to that day. Jocelyn thought it strange that he should be thrown by fate into a position to play the son of the Montagues to this daughter of the Capulets.

As they talked there was a mutual instinct to drop their voices, and on this account the roar of the storm necessitated their drawing quite close together. Something tender came into their tones as quarter-hour after quarter-hour went on, and they forgot the lapse of time. It was quite late when she started up, alarmed at her position.

'Rain or no rain, I can stay no longer,' she said.

'Do come back,' said he, taking her hand. 'I'll return with you. My train has gone.'

'No; I shall go on, and get a lodging in Budmouth town, if ever I reach it.'

'It is so late that there will be no house open, except a little place near the station where you won't care to stay. However, if you are determined I will show you the way. I cannot leave you. It would be too awkward for you to go there alone.'

She persisted, and they started through the twanging and spinning storm. The sea rolled and rose so high on their left, and was so near them on their right, that it seemed as if they were traversing its bottom like the Children of Israel. Nothing but the frail bank of pebbles divided them from the raging gulf without, and at every bang of the tide against it the ground shook, the shingle clashed, the spray rose vertically, and was blown over their heads. Quantities of sea-water trickled through the pebble wall, and ran in rivulets across their path to join the sea within. The 'Island' was an island still.

They had not realized the force of the elements till now. Pedestrians had often been blown into the sea hereabout, and drowned, owing to a sudden breach in the bank; which, however, had something of a supernatural power in being able to close up and join itself together again after such disruption, like Satan's form when, cut in two by the sword of Michael,

> 'The ethereal substance closed,
> Not long divisible.'

Her clothing offered more resistance to the wind than his, and she was consequently in the greater danger. It was impossible to refuse his proffered aid. First he gave his arm, but the wind tore them apart as easily as coupled cherries. He steadied her bodily by encircling her waist with his arm; and she made no objection.

* * *

Somewhere about this time – it might have been sooner, it might have been later – he became conscious of a sensation which, in its incipient and unrecognized form, had lurked within him from some unnoticed moment when he was sitting close to his new friend under the lerret. Though a young man, he was too old a hand not to know what this was, and felt alarmed – even dismayed. It meant a possible migration of the Well-Beloved. The thing had not, however, taken place; and he went on thinking how soft and warm the lady was in her fur covering, as he held her so tightly; the only dry spots in the clothing of either being her left side and his right, where they excluded the rain by their mutual pressure.

As soon as they had crossed the ferry-bridge there was a little more shelter, but he did not relinquish his hold till she requested him. They passed the ruined castle, and having left the island far behind them trod mile after mile till they drew near to the outskirts of the neighbouring watering-place. Into it they plodded without pause, crossing the harbour bridge about midnight, wet to the skin.

He pitied her, and, while he wondered at it, admired her determination. The houses facing the bay now sheltered them completely, and they reached the vicinity of the new railway terminus (which the station was at this date) without difficulty. As he had said, there was only one house open hereabout, a little temperance inn, where the people stayed up for the arrival of the morning mail and passengers from the Channel boats. Their application for admission led to the withdrawal of a bolt, and they stood within the gaslight of the passage.

He could see now that though she was such a fine figure, quite as tall as himself, she was but in the bloom of young womanhood. Her face was certainly striking, though rather by its imperiousness than its beauty; and the beating of the wind and rain and spray had inflamed her cheeks to peony hues.

She persisted in the determination to go on to London by an early morning train, and he therefore offered advice on lesser matters only. 'In that case,' he said, 'you must go up to your room and send down your things, that they may be dried by the fire immediately, or they will not be ready. I will tell the servant to do this, and send you up something to eat.'

She assented to his proposal, without, however, showing any marks of gratitude; and when she had gone Pierston despatched her the light supper promised by the sleepy girl who was 'night porter' at this establishment. He felt ravenously hungry himself, and set about drying his clothes as well as he could, and eating at the same time.

At first he was in doubt what to do, but soon decided to stay where he was till the morrow. By the aid of some temporary wraps, and some slippers from the cupboard, he was contriving to make himself comfortable when the maid-servant came downstairs with a damp armful of woman's raiment.

Pierston withdrew from the fire. The maid-servant knelt down before the blaze and held up with extended arms one of the habiliments of the Juno upstairs, from which a cloud of steam began to rise. As she knelt, the girl nodded forward, recovered herself, and nodded again.

'You are sleepy, my girl,' said Pierston.

'Yes, sir; I have been up a long time. When nobody comes I lie down on the couch in the other room.'

'Then I'll relieve you of that; go and lie down in the other room, just as if we were not here. I'll dry the clothing and put the articles here in a heap, which you can take up to the young lady in the morning.'

The 'night porter' thanked him and left the room, and he soon heard her snoring from the adjoining apartment. Then Jocelyn opened proceedings, overhauling the robes and extending them one by one. As the steam went up he fell into a reverie. He again became conscious of the change which had been initiated during the walk. The Well-Beloved was moving house – had gone over to the wearer of this attire.

In the course of ten minutes he adored her.

And how about little Avice Caro? He did not think of her as before.

He was not sure that he had ever seen the real Beloved in that friend of his youth, solicitous as he was for her welfare. But, loving her or not, he perceived that the spirit, emanation, idealism, which called itself his Love was flitting stealthily from some remoter figure to the near one in the chamber overhead.

Avice had not kept her engagement to meet him in the lonely ruin, fearing her own imaginings. But he, in fact, more than she, had been educated out of the island innocence that had upheld old manners; and this was the strange consequence of Avice's misapprehension.

VI. ON THE BRINK

Miss Bencomb was leaving the hotel for the railway, which was quite near at hand, and had only recently been opened, as if on purpose for this event. At Jocelyn's suggestion she wrote a message to inform her father that she had gone to her aunt's, with a view to allaying anxiety and deterring pursuit. They walked together to the platform and bade each other good-bye; each obtained a ticket independently, and Jocelyn got his luggage from the cloak-room.

On the platform they encountered each other again, and there was a light in their glances at each other which said, as by a flash-telegraph: 'We are bound for the same town, why not enter the same compartment?'

They did.

She took a corner seat, with her back to the engine; he sat opposite. The guard looked in, thought they were lovers, and did not show other travellers into that compartment. They talked on strictly ordinary matters; what she thought he did not know, but at every stopping station he dreaded intrusion. Before they were halfway to London the event he had just begun to realize was a patent fact. The Beloved was again embodied; she filled every fibre and curve of this woman's form.

Drawing near the great London station was like drawing near Doomsday. How should he leave her in the turmoil of a crowded city street? She seemed quite unprepared for the rattle of the scene. He asked her where her aunt lived.

'Bayswater,' said Miss Bencomb.

He called a cab, and proposed that she should share it till they arrived at her aunt's, whose residence lay not much out of the way to his own. Try as he would he could not ascertain if she understood his feelings, but she assented to his offer and entered the vehicle.

'We are old friends,' he said, as they drove onward.

'Indeed, we are,' she answered, without smiling.

'But hereditarily we are mortal enemies, dear Juliet.'

'Yes – What did you say?'

'I said Juliet.'

She laughed in a half-proud way, and murmured: 'Your father is my father's enemy, and my father is mine. Yes, it is so.' And then their eyes caught each other's glance. 'My queenly darling!' he burst out; 'instead of going to your aunt's, will you come and marry me?'

A flush covered her over, which seemed akin to a flush of rage. It was not exactly that, but she was excited. She did not answer, and he feared he had mortally offended her dignity. Perhaps she had only made use of him as a convenient aid to her intentions. However, he went on – 'Your father would not be able to reclaim you then! After all, this is not so precipitate as it seems. You know all about me, my history, my prospects. I know all about you. Our families have been neighbours on that isle for hundreds of years, though you are now such a London product.'

'Will you ever be a Royal Academician?' she asked musingly, her excitement having calmed down.

'I hope to be – I WILL be, if you will be my wife.'

His companion looked at him long.

'Think what a short way out of your difficulty this would be,' he continued. 'No bother about aunts, no fetching home by an angry father.'

It seemed to decide her. She yielded to his embrace.

'How long will it take to marry?' Miss Bencomb asked by-and-by, with obvious self-repression.

'We could do it to-morrow. I could get to Doctors' Commons by noon to-day, and the licence would be ready by to-morrow morning.'

'I won't go to my aunt's, I will be an independent woman! I have been reprimanded as if I were a child of six. I'll be your wife if it is as easy as you say.'

They stopped the cab while they held a consultation. Pierston had rooms and a studio in the neighbourhood of Campden Hill; but it would be hardly desirable to take her thither till they were married. They decided to go to an hotel.

Changing their direction, therefore, they went back to the Strand, and soon ensconced themselves in one of the venerable old taverns of Covent Garden, a precinct which in those days was frequented by West-country people. Jocelyn then left her and proceeded on his errand eastward.

It was about three o'clock when, having arranged all preliminaries necessitated by this sudden change of front, he began strolling slowly back; he felt bewildered, and to walk was a relief. Gazing occasionally into this shop window and that, he called a hansom as by an inspiration, and directed the driver to 'Mellstock Gardens.' Arrived here, he rang the bell of a studio, and in a minute or two it was answered by a young man in shirt-sleeves, about his own age, with a great smeared palette on his left thumb.

'O, you, Pierston! I thought you were in the country. Come in. I'm awfully glad of this. I am here in town finishing off a painting for an American, who wants to take it back with him.'

Pierston followed his friend into the painting-room, where a pretty young woman was sitting sewing. At a signal from the painter she disappeared without speaking.

'I can see from your face you have something to say; so we'll have it all to ourselves. You are in some trouble? What'll you drink?'

'Oh! it doesn't matter what, so that it is alcohol in some shape or form… Now, Somers, you must just listen to me, for I HAVE something to tell.'

Pierston had sat down in an arm-chair, and Somers had resumed his painting. When a servant had brought in brandy to soothe Pierston's nerves, and soda to take off the injurious effects of the brandy, and milk to take off the depleting effects of the soda, Jocelyn began his narrative, addressing it rather to Somers's Gothic chimneypiece, and Somers's Gothic clock, and Somers's Gothic rugs, than to Somers himself, who stood at his picture a little behind his friend.

'Before I tell you what has happened to me,' Pierston said, 'I want to let you know the manner of man I am.'

'Lord – I know already.'

'No, you don't. It is a sort of thing one doesn't like to talk of. I lie awake at night thinking about it.'

'No!' said Somers, with more sympathy, seeing that his friend was really troubled.

'I am under a curious curse, or influence. I am posed, puzzled and perplexed by the legerdemain of a creature – a deity rather; by Aphrodite, as a poet would put it, as I should put it myself in marble. … But I forget – this is not to be a deprecatory wail, but a defence – a sort of Apologia pro vita mea.'

'That's better. Fire away!'

VII. HER EARLIER INCARNATIONS

'You, Somers, are not, I know, one of those who continue to indulge in the world-wide, fond superstition that the Beloved One of any man always, or even usually, cares to remain in one corporeal nook or shell for any great length of time, however much he may wish her to do so. If I am wrong, and you do still hold to that ancient error – well, my story will seem rather queer.'

'Suppose you say the Beloved of some men, not of any man.'

'All right – I'll say one man, this man only, if you are so particular. We are a strange, visionary race down where I come from, and perhaps that accounts for it. The Beloved of this one man, then, has had many incarnations – too many to describe in detail. Each shape, or embodiment, has been a temporary residence only, which she has entered, lived in awhile, and made her exit from, leaving the substance, so far as I have been concerned, a corpse, worse luck! Now, there is no spiritualistic nonsense in this – it is simple fact, put in the plain form that the conventional public are afraid of. So much for the principle.'

'Good. Go on.'

'Well; the first embodiment of her occurred, so nearly as I can recollect, when I was about the age of nine. Her vehicle was a little blue-eyed girl of eight or so, one of a family of eleven, with flaxen hair about her shoulders, which attempted to curl, but ignominiously failed, hanging like chimney-crooks only. This defect used rather to trouble me; and was, I believe, one of the main reasons of my Beloved's departure from that tenement. I cannot remember with any exactness when the departure occurred. I know it was after I had kissed my little friend in a garden-seat on a hot noontide, under a blue gingham umbrella, which we had opened over us as we sat, that passers through East Quarriers might not observe our marks of affection, forgetting that our screen must attract more attention than our persons.

'When the whole dream came to an end through her father leaving the island, I thought my Well-Beloved had gone for ever (being then in the unpractised condition of Adam at sight of the first sunset). But she had not. Laura had gone for ever, but not my Beloved.

'For some months after I had done crying for the flaxen-haired edition of her, my Love did not reappear. Then she came suddenly, unexpectedly, in a situation I should never have predicted. I was standing on the kerbstone of the pavement in Budmouth-Regis, outside the Preparatory School, looking across towards the sea, when a middle-aged gentleman on horseback, and beside him a young lady, also mounted, passed down the street. The girl turned her head, and – possibly because I was gaping at her in awkward admiration, or smiling myself – smiled at me. Having ridden a few paces, she looked round again and smiled.

'It was enough, more than enough, to set me on fire. I understood in a moment the information conveyed to me by my emotion – the Well-Beloved had reappeared. This second form in which it had pleased her to take up her abode was quite a grown young woman's, darker in complexion than the first. Her hair, also worn in a knot, was of an ordinary brown, and so, I think, were her eyes, but the niceties of her features were not to be gathered so cursorily. However, there sat my coveted one, re-embodied; and, bidding my schoolmates a hasty farewell as soon as I could do so without suspicion, I hurried along the Esplanade in the direction she and her father had ridden. But they had put their horses to a canter, and I could not see which way they had gone. In the greatest misery I turned down a side street, but was soon elevated to a state of excitement by seeing the same pair galloping towards me. Flushing up to my hair, I stopped and heroically faced her as she passed. She smiled again, but, alas! upon my Love's cheek there was no blush of passion for me.'

Pierston paused, and drank from his glass, as he lived for a brief moment in the scene he had conjured up. Somers reserved his comments, and Jocelyn continued —

'That afternoon I idled about the streets, looking for her in vain. When I next saw one of the boys who had been with me at her first passing I stealthily reminded him of the incident, and asked if he knew the riders.

"'O yes," he said. "That was Colonel Targe and his daughter Elsie."

"'How old do you think she is?" said I, a sense of disparity in our ages disturbing my mind.

"'O – nineteen, I think they say. She's going to be married the day after to-morrow to Captain Popp, of the 501st, and they are ordered off to India at once."

'The grief which I experienced at this intelligence was such that at dusk I went away to the edge of the harbour, intending to put an end to myself there and then. But I had been told that crabs had been found clinging to the dead faces of persons who had fallen in thereabout, leisurely eating them, and the idea of such an unpleasant contingency deterred me. I should state that the marriage of my Beloved concerned me little; it was her departure that broke my heart. I never saw her again.

'Though I had already learnt that the absence of the corporeal matter did not involve the absence of the informing spirit, I could scarce bring myself to believe that in this case it was possible for her to return to my view without the form she had last inhabited.

'But she did.

'It was not, however, till after a good space of time, during which I passed through that bearish age in boys, their early teens, when girls are their especial contempt. I was about seventeen, and was sitting one evening over a cup of tea in a confectioner's at the very same watering-place, when opposite me a lady took her seat with a little girl. We looked at each other awhile, the child made advances, till I said: "She's a good little thing."

'The lady assented, and made a further remark.

"'She has the soft fine eyes of her mother," said I.

"'Do you think her eyes are good?" asks the lady, as if she had not heard what she had heard most – the last three words of my opinion.

"'Yes – for copies," said I, regarding her.

'After this we got on very well. She informed me that her husband had gone out in a yacht, and I said it was a pity he didn't take her with him for the airing. She gradually disclosed herself in the character of a deserted young wife, and later on I met her in the street without the child. She was going to the landing-stage to meet her husband, so she told me; but she did not know the way.

'I offered to show her, and did so. I will not go into particulars, but I afterwards saw her several times, and soon discovered that the Beloved (as to whose whereabouts I had been at fault so long) lurked here. Though why she had chosen this tantalizing situation of an inaccessible matron's form when so many others offered, it was beyond me to discover. The whole affair ended innocently enough, when the lady left the town with her husband and child: she seemed to regard our acquaintance as a flirtation; yet it was anything but a flirtation for me!

* * *

'Why should I tell the rest of the tantalizing tale! After this, the Well-Beloved put herself in evidence with greater and greater frequency, and it would be impossible for me to give you details of her various incarnations. She came nine times in the course of the two or three ensuing years. Four times she masqueraded as a brunette, twice as a pale-haired creature, and two or three times under a complexion neither light nor dark. Sometimes she was a tall, fine girl, but more often, I think, she preferred to slip into the skin of a lithe airy being, of no great stature. I grew so accustomed to these exits and entrances that I resigned myself to them quite passively, talked to her, kissed her, corresponded with her, ached for her, in each of her several guises. So it went on until a month ago. And then for the first time I was puzzled. She either had, or she had not, entered the person of Avice

Caro, a young girl I had known from infancy. Upon the whole, I have decided that, after all, she did not enter the form of Avice Caro, because I retain so great a respect for her still.'

Pierston here gave in brief the history of his revived comradeship with Avice, the verge of the engagement to which they had reached, and its unexpected rupture by him, merely through his meeting with a woman into whom the Well-Beloved unmistakably moved under his very eyes – by name Miss Marcia Bencomb. He described their spontaneous decision to marry offhand; and then he put it to Somers whether he ought to marry or not – her or anybody else – in such circumstances.

'Certainly not,' said Somers. 'Though, if anybody, little Avice. But not even her. You are like other men, only rather worse. Essentially, all men are fickle, like you; but not with such perceptiveness.'

'Surely fickle is not the word? Fickleness means getting weary of a thing while the thing remains the same. But I have always been faithful to the elusive creature whom I have never been able to get a firm hold of, unless I have done so now. And let me tell you that her flitting from each to each individual has been anything but a pleasure for me – certainly not a wanton game of my instigation. To see the creature who has hitherto been perfect, divine, lose under your very gaze the divinity which has informed her, grow commonplace, turn from flame to ashes, from a radiant vitality to a relic, is anything but a pleasure for any man, and has been nothing less than a racking spectacle to my sight. Each mournful emptied shape stands ever after like the nest of some beautiful bird from which the inhabitant has departed and left it to fill with snow. I have been absolutely miserable when I have looked in a face for her I used to see there, and could see her there no more.'

'You ought not to marry,' repeated Somers.

'Perhaps I oughtn't to! Though poor Marcia will be compromised, I'm afraid, if I don't… Was I not right in saying I am accursed in this thing? Fortunately nobody but myself has suffered on account of it till now. Knowing what to expect, I have seldom ventured on a close acquaintance with any woman, in fear of prematurely driving away the dear one in her; who, however, has in time gone off just the same.'

Pierston soon after took his leave. A friend's advice on such a subject weighs little. He quickly returned to Miss Bencomb.

She was different now. Anxiety had visibly brought her down a notch or two, undone a few degrees of that haughty curl which her lip could occasionally assume. 'How long you have been away!' she said with a show of impatience.

'Never mind, darling. It is all arranged,' said he. 'We shall be able to marry in a few days.'

'Not to-morrow?'

'We can't to-morrow. We have not been here quite long enough.'

'But how did the people at Doctors' Commons know that?'

'Well – I forgot that residence, real or assumed, was necessary, and unfortunately admitted that we had only just arrived.'

'O how stupid! But it can't be helped now. I think, dear, I should have known better, however!'

VIII. 'TOO LIKE THE LIGHTNING'

They lived on at the hotel some days longer, eyed curiously by the chambermaids, and burst in upon every now and then by the waiters as if accidentally. When they were walking together, mostly in back streets for fear of being recognized, Marcia was often silent, and her imperious face looked gloomy.

'Dummy!' he said playfully, on one of these occasions.

'I am vexed that by your admissions at Doctors' Commons you prevented them giving you the licence at once! It is not nice, my living on with you like this!'

'But we are going to marry, dear!'

'Yes,' she murmured, and fell into reverie again. 'What a sudden resolve it was of ours!' she continued. 'I wish I could get my father and mother's consent to our marriage… As we can't complete it for another day or two, a letter might be sent to them and their answer received? I have a mind to write.'

Pierston expressed his doubts of the wisdom of this course, which seemed to make her desire it the more, and the result was a tiff between them. 'Since we are obliged to delay it, I won't marry without their consent!' she cried at last passionately.

'Very well then, dear. Write,' he said.

When they were again indoors, she sat down to a note, but after a while threw aside her pen despairingly. 'No: I cannot do it!' she said. 'I can't bend my pride to such a job. Will YOU write for me, Jocelyn?'

'I? I don't see why I should be the one, particularly as I think it premature.'

'But you have not quarrelled with my father as I have done.'

'Well no. But there is a long-standing antagonism, which would make it odd in me to be the writer. Wait till we are married, and then I will write. Not till then.'

'Then I suppose I must. You don't know my father. He might forgive me marrying into any other family without his knowledge, but he thinks yours such a mean one, and so resents the trade rivalry, that he would never pardon till the day of his death my becoming a Pierston secretly. I didn't see it at first.'

This remark caused an unpleasant jar on the mind of Pierston. Despite his independent artistic position in London, he was staunch to the simple old parent who had stubbornly held out for so many years against Bencomb's encroaching trade, and whose money had educated and maintained Jocelyn as an art-student in the best schools. So he begged her to say no more about his mean family, and she silently resumed her letter, giving an address at a post-office that their quarters might not be discovered, at least just yet.

No reply came by return of post; but, rather ominously, some letters for Marcia that had arrived at her father's since her departure were sent on in silence to the address given. She opened them one by one, till on reading the last, she exclaimed, 'Good gracious!' and burst into laughter.

'What is it?' asked Pierston.

Marcia began to read the letter aloud. It came from a faithful lover of hers, a youthful Jersey gentleman, who stated that he was soon going to start for England to claim his darling, according to her plighted word.

She was half risible, half concerned. 'What shall I do?' she said.

'Do? My dear girl, it seems to me that there is only one thing to do, and that a very obvious thing. Tell him as soon as possible that you are just on the point of marriage.'

Marcia thereupon wrote out a reply to that effect, Jocelyn helping her to shape the phrases as gently as possible.

'I repeat' (her letter concluded) 'that I had quite forgotten! I am deeply sorry; but that is the truth. I have told my intended husband everything, and he is looking over my shoulder as I write.'

Said Jocelyn when he saw this set down: 'You might leave out the last few words. They are rather an extra stab for the poor boy.'

'Stab? It is not that, dear. Why does he want to come bothering me? Jocelyn, you ought to be very proud that I have put you in my letter at all. You said yesterday that I was conceited in declaring I might have married that science-man I told you of. But now you see there was yet another available.'

He, gloomily: 'Well, I don't care to hear about that. To my mind this sort of thing is decidedly unpleasant, though you treat it so lightly.'

'Well,' she pouted, 'I have only done half what you have done!'

'What's that?'

'I have only proved false through forgetfulness, but you have while remembering!'

'O yes; of course you can use Avice Caro as a retort. But don't vex me about her, and make me do such an unexpected thing as regret the falseness.'

She shut her mouth tight, and her face flushed.

The next morning there did come an answer to the letter asking her parents' consent to her union with him; but to Marcia's amazement her father took a line quite other than the one she had expected him to take. Whether she had compromised herself or whether she had not seemed a question for the future rather than the present with him, a native islander, born when old island marriage views prevailed in families; he was fixed in his disapproval of her marriage with a hated Pierston. He did not consent; he would not say more till he could see her: if she had any sense at all she would, if still unmarried, return to the home from which she had evidently been enticed. He would then see what he could do for her in the desperate circumstances she had made for herself; otherwise he would do nothing.

Pierston could not help being sarcastic at her father's evidently low estimate of him and his belongings; and Marcia took umbrage at his sarcasms.

'I am the one deserving of satire if anybody!' she said. 'I begin to feel I was a foolish girl to run away from a father for such a trumpery reason as a little scolding because I had exceeded my allowance.'

'I advised you to go back, Marcie.'

'In a sort of way: not in the right tone. You spoke most contemptuously of my father's honesty as a merchant.'

'I couldn't speak otherwise of him than I did, I'm afraid, knowing what – '.

'What have you to say against him?'

'Nothing – to you, Marcie, beyond what is matter of common notoriety. Everybody knows that at one time he made it the business of his life to ruin my father; and the way he alludes to me in that letter shows that his enmity still continues.'

'That miser ruined by an open-handed man like my father!' said she. 'It is like your people's misrepresentations to say that!'

Marcia's eyes flashed, and her face burnt with an angry heat, the enhanced beauty which this warmth might have brought being killed by the rectilinear sternness of countenance that came therewith.

'Marcia – this temper is too exasperating! I could give you every step of the proceeding in detail – anybody could – the getting the quarries one by one, and everything, my father only holding his own by the most desperate courage. There is no blinking facts. Our parents' relations are an ugly fact in the circumstances of us two people who want to marry, and we are just beginning to perceive it; and how we are going to get over it I cannot tell.'

She said steadily: 'I don't think we shall get over it at all!'

'We may not – we may not – altogether,' Pierston murmured, as he gazed at the fine picture of scorn presented by his Juno's classical face and dark eyes.

'Unless you beg my pardon for having behaved so!'

Pierston could not quite bring himself to see that he had behaved badly to his too imperious lady, and declined to ask forgiveness for what he had not done.

She thereupon left the room. Later in the day she re-entered and broke a silence by saying bitterly: 'I showed temper just now, as you told me. But things have causes, and it is perhaps a mistake that you should have deserted Avice for me. Instead of wedding Rosaline, Romeo must needs go eloping with Juliet. It was a fortunate thing for the affections of those two Veronese lovers that they died when they did. In a short time the enmity of their families would have proved a fruitful source of dissension; Juliet would have gone back to her people, he to his; the subject would have split them as much as it splits us.'

Pierston laughed a little. But Marcia was painfully serious, as he found at tea-time, when she said that since his refusal to beg her pardon she had been thinking over the matter, and had resolved to go to her aunt's after all – at any rate till her father could be induced to agree to their union. Pierston was as chilled by this resolve of hers as he was surprised at her independence in circumstances which usually make women the reverse. But he put no obstacles in her way, and, with a kiss strangely cold after their recent ardour, the Romeo of the freestone Montagues went out of the hotel, to avoid even the appearance of coercing his Juliet of the rival house. When he returned she was gone.

* * *

A correspondence began between these too-hastily pledged ones; and it was carried on in terms of serious reasoning upon their awkward situation on account of the family feud. They saw their recent love as what it was:

'Too rash, too unadvised, too sudden;
Too like the lightning…'

They saw it with an eye whose calmness, coldness, and, it must be added, wisdom, did not promise well for their reunion.

Their debates were clinched by a final letter from Marcia, sent from no other place than her recently left home in the Isle. She informed him that her father had appeared suddenly at her aunt's, and had induced her to go home with him. She had told her father all the circumstances of their elopement, and what mere accidents had caused it: he had persuaded her on what she had almost been convinced of by their disagreement, that all thought of their marriage should be at least postponed for the present; any awkwardness and even scandal being better than that they should immediately unite themselves for life on the strength of a two or three days' resultless passion, and be the wretched victims of a situation they could never change.

Pierston saw plainly enough that he owed it to her father being a born islander, with all the ancient island notions of matrimony lying underneath his acquired conventions, that the stone-merchant did not immediately insist upon the usual remedy for a daughter's precipitancy in such cases, but preferred to await issues.

But the young man still thought that Marcia herself, when her temper had quite cooled, and she was more conscious of her real position, would return to him, in spite of the family hostility. There was no social reason against such a step. In birth the pair were about on one plane; and though Marcia's family had gained a start in the accumulation of wealth, and in the beginnings of social distinction, which lent colour to the feeling that the advantages of the match would be mainly on one side, Pierston was a sculptor who might rise to fame; so that potentially their marriage could not

be considered inauspicious for a woman who, beyond being the probable heiress to a considerable fortune, had no exceptional opportunities.

Thus, though disillusioned, he felt bound in honour to remain on call at his London address as long as there was the slightest chance of Marcia's reappearance, or of the arrival of some message requesting him to join her, that they might, after all, go to the altar together. Yet in the night he seemed to hear sardonic voices, and laughter in the wind at this development of his little romance, and during the slow and colourless days he had to sit and behold the mournful departure of his Well-Beloved from the form he had lately cherished, till she had almost vanished away. The exact moment of her complete withdrawal Pierston knew not, but not many lines of her were longer discernible in Marcia's remembered contours, nor many sounds of her in Marcia's recalled accents. Their acquaintance, though so fervid, had been too brief for such lingering.

There came a time when he learnt, through a trustworthy channel, two pieces of news affecting himself. One was the marriage of Avice Caro with her cousin, the other that the Bencombs had started on a tour round the world, which was to include a visit to a relation of Mr. Bencomb's who was a banker in San Francisco. Since retiring from his former large business the stone merchant had not known what to do with his leisure, and finding that travel benefited his health he had decided to indulge himself thus. Although he was not so informed, Pierston concluded that Marcia had discovered that nothing was likely to happen as a consequence of their elopement, and that she had accompanied her parents. He was more than ever struck with what this signified – her father's obstinate antagonism to her union with one of his blood and name.

IX. FAMILIAR PHENOMENA IN THE DISTANCE

By degrees Pierston began to trace again the customary lines of his existence; and his profession occupied him much as of old. The next year or two only once brought him tidings, through some residents at his former home, of the movements of the Bencombs. The extended voyage of Marcia's parents had given them quite a zest for other scenes and countries; and it was said that her father, a man still in vigorous health except at brief intervals, was utilizing the outlook which his cosmopolitanism afforded him by investing capital in foreign undertakings. What he had supposed turned out to be true; Marcia was with them; no necessity for joining him had arisen; and thus the separation of himself and his nearly married wife by common consent was likely to be a permanent one.

It seemed as if he would scarce ever again discover the carnate dwelling-place of the haunting minion of his imagination. Having gone so near to matrimony with Marcia as to apply for a licence, he had felt for a long while morally bound to her by the incipient contract, and would not intentionally look about him in search of the vanished Ideality. Thus during the first year of Miss Bencomb's absence, when absolutely bound to keep faith with the elusive one's late incarnation if she should return to claim him, this man of the odd fancy would sometimes tremble at the thought of what would become of his solemn intention if the Phantom were suddenly to disclose herself in an unexpected quarter, and seduce him before he was aware. Once or twice he imagined that he saw her in the distance – at the end of a street, on the far sands of a shore, in a window, in a meadow, at the opposite side of a railway station; but he determinedly turned on his heel, and walked the other way.

During the many uneventful seasons that followed Marcia's stroke of independence (for which he was not without a secret admiration at times), Jocelyn threw into plastic creations that ever-bubbling spring of emotion which, without some conduit into space, will surge upwards and ruin all but the greatest men. It was probably owing to this, certainly not on account of any care or anxiety for such a result, that he was successful in his art, successful by a seemingly sudden spurt, which carried him at one bound over the hindrances of years.

He prospered without effort. He was A.R.A.

But recognitions of this sort, social distinctions, which he had once coveted so keenly, seemed to have no utility for him now. By the accident of being a bachelor, he was floating in society without any soul-anchorage or shrine that he could call his own; and, for want of a domestic centre round which honours might crystallize, they dispersed impalpably without accumulating and adding weight to his material well-being.

He would have gone on working with his chisel with just as much zest if his creations had been doomed to meet no mortal eye but his own. This indifference to the popular reception of his dream-figures lent him a curious artistic aplomb that carried him through the gusts of opinion without suffering them to disturb his inherent bias.

The study of beauty was his only joy for years onward. In the streets he would observe a face, or a fraction of a face, which seemed to express to a hair's-breadth in mutable flesh what he was at that moment wishing to express in durable shape. He would dodge and follow the owner like a detective; in omnibus, in cab, in steam-boat, through crowds, into shops, churches, theatres, public-houses, and slums – mostly, when at close quarters, to be disappointed for his pains.

In these professional beauty-chases he sometimes cast his eye across the Thames to the wharves on the south side, and to that particular one whereat his father's tons of freestone were daily landed from the ketches of the south coast. He could occasionally discern the white blocks lying there, vast cubes so persistently nibbled by his parent from his island rock in the English Channel, that it seemed as if in time it would be nibbled all away.

One thing it passed him to understand: on what field of observation the poets and philosophers based their assumption that the passion of love was intensest in youth and burnt lower as maturity

advanced. It was possibly because of his utter domestic loneliness that, during the productive interval which followed the first years of Marcia's departure, when he was drifting along from five-and-twenty to eight-and-thirty, Pierston occasionally loved with an ardour – though, it is true, also with a self-control – unknown to him when he was green in judgment.

* * *

His whimsical isle-bred fancy had grown to be such an emotion that the Well-Beloved – now again visible – was always existing somewhere near him. For months he would find her on the stage of a theatre: then she would flit away, leaving the poor, empty carcase that had lodged her to mumm on as best it could without her – a sorry lay figure to his eyes, heaped with imperfections and sullied with commonplace. She would reappear, it might be, in an at first unnoticed lady, met at some fashionable evening party, exhibition, bazaar, or dinner; to flit from her, in turn, after a few months, and stand as a graceful shop-girl at some large drapery warehouse into which he had strayed on an unaccustomed errand. Then she would forsake this figure and redisclose herself in the guise of some popular authoress, piano-player, or fiddleress, at whose shrine he would worship for perhaps a twelvemonth. Once she was a dancing-girl at the Royal Moorish Palace of Varieties, though during her whole continuance at that establishment he never once exchanged a word with her, nor did she first or last ever dream of his existence. He knew that a ten-minutes' conversation in the wings with the substance would send the elusive haunter scurrying fearfully away into some other even less accessible mask-figure.

She was a blonde, a brunette, tall, petite, svelte, straight-featured, full, curvilinear. Only one quality remained unalterable: her instability of tenure. In Borne's phrase, nothing was permanent in her but change.

'It is odd,' he said to himself, 'that this experience of mine, or idiosyncrasy, or whatever it is, which would be sheer waste of time for other men, creates sober business for me.' For all these dreams he translated into plaster, and found that by them he was hitting a public taste he had never deliberately aimed at, and mostly despised. He was, in short, in danger of drifting away from a solid artistic reputation to a popularity which might possibly be as brief as it would be brilliant and exciting.

'You will be caught some day, my friend,' Somers would occasionally observe to him. 'I don't mean to say entangled in anything discreditable, for I admit that you are in practice as ideal as in theory. I mean the process will be reversed. Some woman, whose Well-Beloved flits about as yours does now, will catch your eye, and you'll stick to her like a limpet, while she follows her Phantom and leaves you to ache as you will.'

'You may be right; but I think you are wrong,' said Pierston. 'As flesh she dies daily, like the Apostle's corporeal self; because when I grapple with the reality she's no longer in it, so that I cannot stick to one incarnation if I would.'

'Wait till you are older,' said Somers.

PART SECOND – A YOUNG MAN OF FORTY

‘Since Love will needs that I shall love,
Of very force I must agree:
And since no chance may it remove
In wealth and in adversity
I shall alway myself apply
To serve and suffer patiently.’

– Sir T. Wyatt.

I. THE OLD PHANTOM BECOMES DISTINCT

In the course of these long years Pierston's artistic emotions were abruptly suspended by the news of his father's sudden death at Sandbourne, whither the stone-merchant had gone for a change of air by the advice of his physician.

Mr. Pierston, senior, it must be admitted, had been something miserly in his home life, as Marcia had so rashly reminded his son. But he had never stinted Jocelyn. He had been rather a hard taskmaster, though as a paymaster trustworthy; a ready-money man, just and ungenerous. To every one's surprise, the capital he had accumulated in the stone trade was of large amount for a business so unostentatiously carried on – much larger than Jocelyn had ever regarded as possible. While the son had been modelling and chipping his ephemeral fancies into perennial shapes, the father had been persistently chiselling for half a century at the crude original matter of those shapes, the stern, isolated rock in the Channel; and by the aid of his cranes and pulleys, his trolleys and his boats, had sent off his spoil to all parts of Great Britain. When Jocelyn had wound up everything and disposed of the business, as recommended by his father's will, he found himself enabled to add about eighty thousand pounds to the twelve thousand which he already possessed from professional and other sources.

After arranging for the sale of some freehold properties in the island other than quarries – for he did not intend to reside there – he returned to town. He often wondered what had become of Marcia. He had promised never to trouble her; nor for a whole twenty years had he done so; though he had often sighed for her as a friend of sterling common sense in practical difficulties.

Her parents were, he believed, dead; and she, he knew, had never gone back to the isle. Possibly she had formed some new tie abroad, and had made it next to impossible to discover her by her old name.

A reposeful time ensued. Almost his first entry into society after his father's death occurred one evening, when, for want of knowing what better to do, he responded to an invitation sent by one of the few ladies of rank whom he numbered among his friends, and set out in a cab for the square wherein she lived during three or four months of the year.

The hansom turned the corner, and he obtained a raking view of the houses along the north side, of which hers was one, with the familiar linkman at the door. There were Chinese lanterns, too, on the balcony. He perceived in a moment that the customary 'small and early' reception had resolved itself on this occasion into something very like great and late. He remembered that there had just been a political crisis, which accounted for the enlargement of the Countess of Channelcliffe's assembly; for hers was one of the neutral or non-political houses at which party politics are more freely agitated than at the professedly party gatherings.

There was such a string of carriages that Pierston did not wait to take his turn at the door, but unobtrusively alighted some yards off and walked forward. He had to pause a moment behind the wall of spectators which barred his way, and as he paused some ladies in white cloaks crossed from their carriages to the door on the carpet laid for the purpose. He had not seen their faces, nothing of them but vague forms, and yet he was suddenly seized with a presentiment. Its gist was that he might be going to re-encounter the Well-Beloved that night: after her recent long hiding she meant to reappear and intoxicate him. That liquid sparkle of her eye, that lingual music, that turn of the head, how well he knew it all, despite the many superficial changes, and how instantly he would recognize it under whatever complexion, contour, accent, height, or carriage that it might choose to masquerade!

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.