

The Well-Beloved

By

Thomas Hardy

1. I. A SUPPOSITIOUS 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,

The melancholy ruins
Of cancelled cycles,...

with a distinctiveness that called the eyes to it as strongly as any spectacle he had beheld afar.

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.