

1. 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.

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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.