

## 1. 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.

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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.