1. 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!'