

## 1. 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.

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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.