2. I. THE OLD PHANTOM BECOMES DISTINCT

In the course of these long years Pierston's artistic emotions were abruptly suspended by the news of his father's sudden death at Sandbourne, whither the stone-merchant had gone for a change of air by the advice of his physician.

Mr. Pierston, senior, it must be admitted, had been something miserly in his home life, as Marcia had so rashly reminded his son. But he had never stinted Jocelyn. He had been rather a hard taskmaster, though as a paymaster trustworthy; a ready-money man, just and ungenerous. To every one's surprise, the capital he had accumulated in the stone trade was of large amount for a business so unostentatiously carried on--much larger than Jocelyn had ever regarded as possible. While the son had been modelling and chipping his ephemeral fancies into perennial shapes, the father had been persistently chiselling for half a century at the crude original matter of those shapes, the stern, isolated rock in the Channel; and by the aid of his cranes and pulleys, his trolleys and his boats, had sent off his spoil to all parts of Great Britain.
When Jocelyn had wound up everything and disposed of the business, as recommended by his father's will, he found himself enabled to add about eighty thousand pounds to the twelve thousand which he already possessed from professional and other sources.

After arranging for the sale of some freehold properties in the island other than quarries--for he did not intend to reside there--he returned to town. He often wondered what had become of Marcia. He had promised never to trouble her; nor for a whole twenty years had he done so; though he had often sighed for her as a friend of sterling common sense in practical difficulties.

Her parents were, he believed, dead; and she, he knew, had never gone back to the isle. Possibly she had formed some new tie abroad, and had made it next to impossible to discover her by her old name.

A reposeful time ensued. Almost his first entry into society after his father's death occurred one evening, when, for want of knowing what better to do, he responded to an invitation sent by one of the few ladies of rank whom he numbered among his friends, and set out in a cab for the square wherein she lived during three or four months of the year.

The hansom turned the corner, and he obtained a raking view of the houses along the north side, of which hers was one, with the familiar linkman at the door. There were Chinese lanterns, too, on the balcony. He perceived in a moment that the customary 'small and early' reception had resolved itself on this occasion into something very like great and late. He remembered that there had just been a political crisis,

which accounted for the enlargement of the Countess of Channelcliffe's assembly; for hers was one of the neutral or non-political houses at which party politics are more freely agitated than at the professedly party gatherings.

There was such a string of carriages that Pierston did not wait to take his turn at the door, but unobtrusively alighted some yards off and walked forward. He had to pause a moment behind the wall of spectators which barred his way, and as he paused some ladies in white cloaks crossed from their carriages to the door on the carpet laid for the purpose. He had not seen their faces, nothing of them but vague forms, and yet he was suddenly seized with a presentiment. Its gist was that he might be going to re-encounter the Well-Beloved that night: after her recent long hiding she meant to reappear and intoxicate him. That liquid sparkle of her eye, that lingual music, that turn of the head, how well he knew it all, despite the many superficial changes, and how instantly he would recognize it under whatever complexion, contour, accent, height, or carriage that it might choose to masquerade!

Pierston's other conjecture, that the night was to be a lively political one, received confirmation as soon as he reached the hall, where a simmer of excitement was perceptible as surplus or overflow from above down the staircase--a feature which he had always noticed to be present when any climax or sensation had been reached in the world of party and faction.

'And where have you been keeping yourself so long, young man?' said his hostess archly, when he had shaken hands with her. (Pierston was always regarded as a young man, though he was now about forty.) 'O yes, of course, I remember,' she added, looking serious in a moment at thought of his loss. The Countess was a woman with a good-natured manner verging on that oft-claimed feminine quality, humour, and was quickly sympathetic.

She then began to tell him of a scandal in the political side to which she nominally belonged, one that had come out of the present crisis; and that, as for herself, she had sworn to abjure politics for ever on account of it, so that he was to regard her forthwith as a more neutral householder than ever. By this time some more people had surged upstairs, and Pierston prepared to move on.

'You are looking for somebody--I can see that,' said she.

'Yes--a lady,' said Pierston.

'Tell me her name, and I'll try to think if she's here.'

'I cannot; I don't know it,' he said.

'Indeed! What is she like?'

'I cannot describe her, not even her complexion or dress.'

Lady Channelcliffe looked a pout, as if she thought he were teasing her, and he moved on in the current. The fact was that, for a moment, Pierston fancied he had made the sensational discovery that the One he was in search of lurked in the person of the very hostess he had conversed with, who was charming always, and particularly charming to-night; he was just feeling an incipient consternation at the possibility of such a jade's trick in his Beloved, who had once before chosen to embody herself as a married woman, though, happily, at that time with no serious results. However, he felt that he had been mistaken, and that the fancy had been solely owing to the highly charged electric condition in which he had arrived by reason of his recent isolation.

The whole set of rooms formed one great utterance of the opinions of the hour. The gods of party were present with their embattled seraphim, but the brilliancy of manner and form in the handling of public questions was only less conspicuous than the paucity of original ideas. No principles of wise government had place in any mind, a blunt and jolly personalism as to the Ins and Outs animating all. But Jocelyn's interest did not run in this stream: he was like a stone in a purling brook, waiting for some peculiar floating object to be brought towards him and to stick upon his mental surface.

Thus looking for the next new version of the fair figure, he did not consider at the moment, though he had done so at other times, that this presentiment of meeting her was, of all presentiments, just the sort of one to work out its own fulfilment.

He looked for her in the knot of persons gathered round a past Prime Minister who was standing in the middle of the largest room discoursing in the genial, almost jovial, manner natural to him at these times. The two or three ladies forming his audience had been joined by another in black and white, and it was on her that Pierston's attention was directed, as well as the great statesman's, whose first sheer gaze at her, expressing 'Who are you?' almost audibly, changed into an interested, listening look as the few words she spoke were uttered--for the Minister differed from many of his standing in being extremely careful not to interrupt a timid speaker, giving way in an instant if anybody else began with him. Nobody knew better than himself that all may learn, and his manner was that of an unconceited man who could catch
an idea readily, even if he could not undertake to create one.

The lady told her little story--whatever it was Jocelyn could not hear it--the statesman laughed: 'Haugh-haugh-haugh!'

The lady blushed. Jocelyn, wrought up to a high tension by the aforesaid presentiment that his Shelleyan 'One-shape-of-many-names' was about to reappear, paid little heed to the others, watching for a full view of the lady who had won his attention.

That lady remained for the present partially screened by her neighbours. A diversion was caused by Lady Channelcliffe bringing up somebody to present to the ex-Minister; the ladies got mixed, and Jocelyn lost sight of the one whom he was beginning to suspect as the stealthily returned absentee.

He looked for her in a kindly young lady of the house, his hostess's relation, who appeared to more advantage that night than she had ever done before--in a sky-blue dress, which had nothing between it and the fair skin of her neck, lending her an unusually soft and sylph-like aspect. She saw him, and they converged. Her look of 'What do you think of me NOW?' was suggested, he knew, by the thought that the last time they met she had appeared under the disadvantage of mourning clothes, on a wet day in a country-house, where everybody was cross.

'I have some new photographs, and I want you to tell me whether they are good,' she said. 'Mind you are to tell me truly, and no favour.'

She produced the pictures from an adjoining drawer, and they sat down together upon an ottoman for the purpose of examination. The portraits, taken by the last fashionable photographer, were very good, and he told her so; but as he spoke and compared them his mind was fixed on something else than the mere judgment. He wondered whether the elusive one were indeed in the frame of this girl.

He looked up at her. To his surprise, her mind, too, was on other things bent than on the pictures. Her eyes were glancing away to distant people, she was apparently considering the effect she was producing upon them by this cosy tete-a-tete with Pierston, and upon one in particular, a man of thirty, of military appearance, whom Pierston did not know. Quite convinced now that no phantom belonging to him was contained in the outlines of the present young lady, he could coolly survey her as he responded. They were both doing the same thing--each was pretending to be deeply interested in what the other was talking about, the attention of the two alike flitting away to other corners of the room even when the very point of their discourse was pending.

No, he had not seen Her yet. He was not going to see her, apparently, to-night; she was scared away by the twanging political atmosphere. But he still moved on searchingly, hardly heeding certain spectral imps

other than Aphroditean, who always haunted these places, and jeeringly pointed out that under the white hair of this or that ribanded old man, with a forehead grown wrinkled over treaties which had swayed the fortunes of Europe, with a voice which had numbered sovereigns among its respectful listeners, might be a heart that would go inside a nut-shell; that beneath this or that white rope of pearl and pink bosom, might lie the half-lung which had, by hook or by crook, to sustain its possessor above-ground till the wedding-day.

At that moment he encountered his amiable host, and almost simultaneously caught sight of the lady who had at first attracted him and then had disappeared. Their eyes met, far off as they were from each other. Pierston laughed inwardly: it was only in ticklish excitement as to whether this was to prove a true trouvaille, and with no instinct to mirth; for when under the eyes of his Jill-o'-the-Wisp he was more inclined to palpitate like a sheep in a fair.

However, for the minute he had to converse with his host, Lord Channelcliffe, and almost the first thing that friend said to him was: 'Who is that pretty woman in the black dress with the white fluff about it and the pearl necklace?'

'I don't know,' said Jocelyn, with incipient jealousy: 'I was just going to ask the same thing.'

'O, we shall find out presently, I suppose. I daresay my wife knows.' They had parted, when a hand came upon his shoulder. Lord Channelcliffe had turned back for an instant: 'I find she is the granddaughter of my father's old friend, the last Lord Hengistbury. Her name is Mrs.--Mrs. Pine-Avon; she lost her husband two or three years ago, very shortly after their marriage.'

Lord Channelcliffe became absorbed into some adjoining dignitary of the Church, and Pierston was left to pursue his quest alone. A young friend of his--the Lady Mabella Buttermead, who appeared in a cloud of muslin and was going on to a ball--had been brought against him by the tide. A warm-hearted, emotional girl was Lady Mabella, who laughed at the humorousness of being alive. She asked him whither he was bent, and he told her.

'O yes, I know her very well!' said Lady Mabella eagerly. 'She told me one day that she particularly wished to meet you. Poor thing--so sad--she lost her husband. Well, it was a long time ago now, certainly. Women ought not to marry and lay themselves open to such catastrophes, ought they, Mr. Pierston? I never shall. I am determined never to run such a risk! Now, do you think I shall?'

'Marry? O no; never,' said Pierston drily.

'That's very satisfying.' But Mabella was scarcely comfortable under his answer, even though jestingly returned, and she added: 'But sometimes I think I may, just for the fun of it. Now we'll steer across to her, and catch her, and I'll introduce you. But we shall never get to her at this rate!'

'Never, unless we adopt "the ugly rush," like the citizens who follow the Lord Mayor's Show.'

They talked, and inched towards the desired one, who, as she discoursed with a neighbour, seemed to be of those--

'Female forms, whose gestures beam with mind,'

seen by the poet in his Vision of the Golden City of Islam.

Their progress was continually checked. Pierston was as he had sometimes seemed to be in a dream, unable to advance towards the object of pursuit unless he could have gathered up his feet into the air. After ten minutes given to a preoccupied regard of shoulder-blades, back hair, glittering headgear, neck-napes, moles, hairpins, pearl-powder, pimples, minerals cut into facets of many-coloured rays, necklace-clasps, fans, stays, the seven styles of elbow and arm, the thirteen varieties of ear; and by using the toes of his dress-boots as coulters with which he ploughed his way and that of Lady Mabella in the direction they were aiming at, he drew near to Mrs. Pine-Avon, who was drinking a cup of tea in the back drawing-room.

'My dear Nichola, we thought we should never get to you, because it is worse to-night, owing to these dreadful politics! But we've done it.' And she proceeded to tell her friend of Pierston's existence hard by.

It seemed that the widow really did wish to know him, and that Lady Mabella Buttermead had not indulged in one of the too frequent inventions in that kind. When the youngest of the trio had made the pair acquainted with each other she left them to talk to a younger man than the sculptor.

Mrs. Pine-Avon's black velvets and silks, with their white accompaniments, finely set off the exceeding fairness of her neck and shoulders, which, though unwhitened artificially, were without a speck or blemish of the least degree. The gentle, thoughtful creature she had looked from a distance she now proved herself to be; she held also sound rather than current opinions on the plastic arts, and was the first intellectual woman he had seen there that night, except one or two as aforesaid.

They soon became well acquainted, and at a pause in their conversation noticed the fresh excitement caused by the arrival of some late comers with more news. The latter had been brought by a rippling, bright-eyed lady in black, who made the men listen to her, whether they would or no.

'I am glad I am an outsider,' said Jocelyn's acquaintance, now seated on a sofa beside which he was standing. 'I wouldn't be like my cousin, over there, for the world. She thinks her husband will be turned out at the next election, and she's quite wild.'

'Yes; it is mostly the women who are the gamesters; the men only the cards. The pity is that politics are looked on as being a game for politicians, just as cricket is a game for cricketers; not as the serious duties of political trustees.'

'How few of us ever think or feel that "the nation of every country dwells in the cottage," as somebody says!'

'Yes. Though I wonder to hear you quote that.'

'O--I am of no party, though my relations are. There can be only one best course at all times, and the wisdom of the nation should be directed to finding it, instead of zigzagging in two courses, according to the will of the party which happens to have the upper hand.'

Having started thus, they found no difficulty in agreeing on many points. When Pierston went downstairs from that assembly at a quarter to one, and passed under the steaming nostrils of an ambassador's horses to a hansom which waited for him against the railing of the square, he had an impression that the Beloved had re-emerged from the shadows, without any hint or initiative from him--to whom, indeed, such re-emergence was an unquestionably awkward thing.

In this he was aware, however, that though it might be now, as heretofore, the Loved who danced before him, it was the Goddess behind her who pulled the string of that Jumping Jill. He had lately been trying his artist hand again on the Dea's form in every conceivable phase and mood. He had become a one-part man--a presenter of her only. But his efforts had resulted in failures. In her implacable vanity she might be punishing him anew for presenting her so deplorably.