

2. II. SHE DRAWS CLOSE AND SATISFIES

He could not forget Mrs. Pine-Avon's eyes, though he remembered nothing of her other facial details. They were round, inquiring, luminous. How that chestnut hair of hers had shone: it required no tiara to set it off, like that of the dowager he had seen there, who had put ten thousand pounds upon her head to make herself look worse than she would have appeared with the ninepenny muslin cap of a servant woman.

Now the question was, ought he to see her again? He had his doubts. But, unfortunately for discretion, just when he was coming out of the rooms he had encountered an old lady of seventy, his friend Mrs. Brightwalton--the Honourable Mrs. Brightwalton--and she had hastily asked him to dinner for the day after the morrow, stating in the honest way he knew so well that she had heard he was out of town, or she would have asked him two or three weeks ago. Now, of all social things that Pierston liked it was to be asked to dinner off-hand, as a stopgap in place of some bishop, earl, or Under-Secretary who couldn't come, and when the invitation was supplemented by the tidings that the lady who had so impressed him was to be one of the guests, he had promised instantly.

At the dinner, he took down Mrs. Pine-Avon upon his arm and talked to nobody else during the meal. Afterwards they kept apart awhile in the drawing-room for form's sake; but eventually gravitated together again, and finished the evening in each other's company. When, shortly after eleven, he came away, he felt almost certain that within those luminous grey eyes the One of his eternal fidelity had verily taken lodgings--and for a long lease. But this was not all. At parting, he had, almost involuntarily, given her hand a pressure of a peculiar and indescribable kind; a little response from her, like a mere pulsation, of the same sort, told him that the impression she had made upon him was reciprocated. She was, in a word, willing to go on.

But was he able?

There had not been much harm in the flirtation thus far; but did she know his history, the curse upon his nature?--that he was the Wandering Jew of the love-world, how restlessly ideal his fancies were, how the artist in him had consumed the wooer, how he was in constant dread lest he should wrong some woman twice as good as himself by seeming to mean what he fain would mean but could not, how useless he was likely to be for practical steps towards householding, though he was all the while pining for domestic life. He was now over forty, she was probably thirty; and he dared not make unmeaning love with the careless selfishness of a younger man. It was unfair to go further without telling her, even though, hitherto, such explicitness had not been absolutely demanded.

He determined to call immediately on the New Incarnation.

She lived not far from the long, fashionable Hamptonshire Square, and he went thither with expectations of having a highly emotional time, at least. But somehow the very bell-pull seemed cold, although she had so earnestly asked him to come.

As the house spoke, so spoke the occupant, much to the astonishment of the sculptor. The doors he passed through seemed as if they had not been opened for a month; and entering the large drawing-room, he beheld, in an arm-chair, in the far distance, a lady whom he journeyed across the carpet to reach, and ultimately did reach. To be sure it was Mrs. Nichola Pine-Avon, but frosted over indescribably. Raising her eyes in a slightly inquiring manner from the book she was reading, she leant back in the chair, as if soaking herself in luxurious sensations which had nothing to do with him, and replied to his greeting with a few commonplace words.

The unfortunate Jocelyn, though recuperative to a degree, was at first terribly upset by this reception. He had distinctly begun to love Nichola, and he felt sick and almost resentful. But happily his affection was incipient as yet, and a sudden sense of the ridiculous in his own position carried him to the verge of risibility during the scene. She signified a chair, and began the critical study of some rings she wore.

They talked over the day's news, and then an organ began to grind outside. The tune was a rollicking air he had heard at some music-hall; and, by way of a diversion, he asked her if she knew the composition.

'No, I don't!' she replied.

'Now, I'll tell you all about it,' said he gravely. 'It is based on a sound old melody called "The Jilt's Hornpipe." Just as they turn Madeira into port in the space of a single night, so this old air has been taken and doctored, and twisted about, and brought out as a new popular ditty.'

'Indeed!'

'If you are in the habit of going much to the music-halls or the burlesque theatres--'

'Yes?'

'You would find this is often done, with excellent effect.'

She thawed a little, and then they went on to talk about her house, which had been newly painted, and decorated with greenish-blue satin up to the height of a person's head--an arrangement that somewhat improved her slightly faded, though still pretty, face, and was helped by the awnings over the windows.

'Yes; I have had my house some years,' she observed complacently, 'and I like it better every year.'

'Don't you feel lonely in it sometimes?'

'O never!'

However, before he rose she grew friendly to some degree, and when he left, just after the arrival of three opportune young ladies she seemed regretful. She asked him to come again; and he thought he would tell the truth. 'No: I shall not care to come again,' he answered, in a tone inaudible to the young ladies.

She followed him to the door. 'What an uncivil thing to say!' she murmured in surprise.

'It is rather uncivil. Good-bye,' said Pierston.

As a punishment she did not ring the bell, but left him to find his way out as he could. 'Now what the devil this means I cannot tell,' he said to himself, reflecting stock-still for a moment on the stairs. And yet the meaning was staring him in the face.

Meanwhile one of the three young ladies had said, 'What interesting man was that, with his lovely head of hair? I saw him at Lady Channelcliffe's the other night.'

'Jocelyn Pierston.'

'O, Nichola, that IS too bad! To let him go in that shabby way, when I would have given anything to know him! I have wanted to know him ever since I found out how much his experiences had dictated his statuary, and I discovered them by seeing in a Jersey paper of the marriage of a person supposed to be his wife, who ran off with him many years ago, don't you know, and then wouldn't marry him, in obedience to some novel social principles she had invented for herself.'

'O! didn't he marry her?' said Mrs. Pine-Avon, with a start. 'Why, I heard only yesterday that he did, though they have lived apart ever since.'

'Quite a mistake,' said the young lady. 'How I wish I could run after

him!

But Jocelyn was receding from the pretty widow's house with long strides. He went out very little during the next few days, but about a week later he kept an engagement to dine with Lady Iris Speedwell, whom he never neglected, because she was the brightest hostess in London.

By some accident he arrived rather early. Lady Iris had left the drawing-room for a moment to see that all was right in the dining-room, and when he was shown in there stood alone in the lamplight Nichola Pine-Avon. She had been the first arrival. He had not in the least expected to meet her there, further than that, in a general sense, at Lady Iris's you expected to meet everybody.

She had just come out of the cloak-room, and was so tender and even apologetic that he had not the heart to be other than friendly. As the other guests dropped in, the pair retreated into a shady corner, and she talked beside him till all moved off for the eating and drinking.

He had not been appointed to take her across to the dining-room, but at the table found her exactly opposite. She looked very charming between the candles, and then suddenly it dawned upon him that her previous manner must have originated in some false report about Marcia, of whose existence he had not heard for years. Anyhow, he was not disposed to resent an inexplicability in womankind, having found that it usually arose independently of fact, reason, probability, or his own deserts.

So he dined on, catching her eyes and the few pretty words she made opportunity to project across the table to him now and then. He was courteously responsive only, but Mrs. Pine-Avon herself distinctly made advances. He re-admired her, while at the same time her conduct in her own house had been enough to check his confidence--enough even to make him doubt if the Well-Beloved really resided within those contours, or had ever been more than the most transitory passenger through that interesting and accomplished soul.

He was pondering this question, yet growing decidedly moved by the playful pathos of her attitude when, by chance, searching his pocket for his handkerchief, something crackled, and he felt there an unopened letter, which had arrived at the moment he was leaving his house, and he had slipped into his coat to read in the cab as he drove along. Pierston drew it sufficiently forth to observe by the post-mark that it came from his natal isle. Having hardly a correspondent in that part of the world now he began to conjecture on the possible sender.

The lady on his right, whom he had brought in, was a leading actress of the town--indeed, of the United Kingdom and America, for that matter--a creature in airy clothing, translucent, like a balsam or sea-anemone,

without shadows, and in movement as responsive as some highly lubricated, many-wired machine, which, if one presses a particular spring, flies open and reveals its works. The spring in the present case was the artistic commendation she deserved and craved. At this particular moment she was engaged with the man on her own right, a representative of Family, who talked positively and hollowly, as if shouting down a vista of five hundred years from the Feudal past. The lady on Jocelyn's left, wife of a Lord Justice of Appeal, was in like manner talking to her companion on the outer side; so that, for the time, he was left to himself. He took advantage of the opportunity, drew out his letter, and read it as it lay upon his napkin, nobody observing him, so far as he was aware.

It came from the wife of one of his father's former workmen, and was concerning her son, whom she begged Jocelyn to recommend as candidate for some post in town that she wished him to fill. But the end of the letter was what arrested him--

'You will be sorry to hear, Sir, that dear little Avice Caro, as we used to call her in her maiden days, is dead. She married her cousin, if you do mind, and went away from here for a good-few years, but was left a widow, and came back a twelvemonth ago; since when she faltered and faltered, and now she is gone.'