

2. III. SHE BECOMES AN INACCESSIBLE GHOST

By imperceptible and slow degrees the scene at the dinner-table receded into the background, behind the vivid presentment of Avice Caro, and the old, old scenes on Isle Vindilia which were inseparable from her personality. The dining room was real no more, dissolving under the bold stony promontory and the incoming West Sea. The handsome marchioness in

geranium-red and diamonds, who was visible to him on his host's right hand opposite, became one of the glowing vermilion sunsets that he had watched so many times over Deadman's Bay, with the form of Avice in the foreground. Between his eyes and the judge who sat next to Nichola, with a chin so raw that he must have shaved every quarter of an hour during the day, intruded the face of Avice, as she had glanced at him in their last parting. The crannied features of the evergreen society lady, who, if she had been a few years older, would have been as old-fashioned as her daughter, shaped themselves to the dusty quarries of his and Avice's parents, down which he had clambered with Avice hundreds of times. The ivy trailing about the table-cloth, the lights in the tall candlesticks, and the bunches of flowers, were transmuted into the ivies of the cliff-built Castle, the tufts of seaweed, and the lighthouses on the isle. The salt airs of the ocean killed the smell of the viands, and instead of the clatter of voices came the monologue of the tide off the Beal.

More than all, Nichola Pine-Avon lost the blooming radiance which she had latterly acquired; she became a woman of his acquaintance with no distinctive traits; she seemed to grow material, a superficies of flesh and bone merely, a person of lines and surfaces; she was a language in living cipher no more.

When the ladies had withdrawn it was just the same. The soul of Avice--the only woman he had NEVER loved of those who had loved him--surrounded him like a firmament. Art drew near to him in the person of one of the most distinguished of portrait painters; but there was only one painter for Jocelyn--his own memory. All that was eminent in European surgery addressed him in the person of that harmless and unassuming fogey whose hands had been inside the bodies of hundreds of living men; but the lily-white corpse of an obscure country-girl chilled the interest of discourse with such a king of operators.

Reaching the drawing-room he talked to his hostess. Though she had entertained three-and-twenty guests at her table that night she had known not only what every one of them was saying and doing throughout the repast, but what every one was thinking. So, being an old friend, she said quietly, 'What has been troubling you? Something has, I know. I have been travelling over your face and have seen it there.'

Nothing could less express the meaning his recent news had for him than a statement of its facts. He told of the opening of the letter and the discovery of the death of an old acquaintance.

'The only woman whom I never rightly valued, I may almost say!' he added; 'and therefore the only one I shall ever regret!'

Whether she considered it a sufficient explanation or not the woman of experiences accepted it as such. She was the single lady of his circle whom nothing erratic in his doings could surprise, and he often gave her stray ends of his confidence thus with perfect safety.

He did not go near Mrs. Pine-Avon again; he could not: and on leaving the house walked abstractedly along the streets till he found himself at his own door. In his room he sat down, and placing his hands behind his head thought his thoughts anew.

At one side of the room stood an escritoire, and from a lower drawer therein he took out a small box tightly nailed down. He forced the cover with the poker. The box contained a variety of odds and ends, which Pierston had thrown into it from time to time in past years for future sorting--an intention that he had never carried out. From the melancholy mass of papers, faded photographs, seals, diaries, withered flowers, and such like, Jocelyn drew a little portrait, one taken on glass in the primitive days of photography, and framed with tinsel in the commonest way.

It was Avice Caro, as she had appeared during the summer month or two which he had spent with her on the island twenty years before this time, her young lips pursed up, her hands meekly folded. The effect of the glass was to lend to the picture much of the softness characteristic of the original. He remembered when it was taken--during one afternoon they had spent together at a neighbouring watering-place, when he had suggested her sitting to a touting artist on the sands, there being nothing else for them to do. A long contemplation of the likeness completed in his emotions what the letter had begun. He loved the woman dead and inaccessible as he had never loved her in life. He had thought of her but at distant intervals during the twenty years since that parting occurred, and only as somebody he could have wedded. Yet now the times of youthful friendship with her, in which he had learnt every note of her innocent nature, flamed up into a yearning and passionate attachment, embittered by regret beyond words.

That kiss which had offended his dignity, which she had so childishly given him before her consciousness of womanhood had been awakened; what he would have offered to have a quarter of it now!

Pierston was almost angry with himself for his feelings of this night, so unreasonably, motivelessly strong were they towards the lost young playmate. 'How senseless of me!' he said, as he lay in his lonely bed. She had been another man's wife almost the whole time since he was estranged from her, and now she was a corpse. Yet the absurdity did not make his grief the less: and the consciousness of the intrinsic, almost radiant, purity of this newsprung affection for a flown spirit forbade him to check it. The flesh was absent altogether; it was love rarefied and refined to its highest attar. He had felt nothing like it before.

The next afternoon he went down to the club; not his large club, where the men hardly spoke to each other, but the homely one where they told stories of an afternoon, and were not ashamed to confess among themselves to personal weaknesses and follies, knowing well that such secrets would go no further. But he could not tell this. So volatile and intangible was the story that to convey it in words would have been as hard as to cage a perfume.

They observed his altered manner, and said he was in love. Pierston admitted that he was; and there it ended. When he reached home he looked out of his bed-room window, and began to consider in what direction from where he stood that darling little figure lay. It was straight across there, under the young pale moon. The symbol signified well. The divinity of the silver bow was not more excellently pure than she, the lost, had been. Under that moon was the island of Ancient Slingers, and on the island a house, framed from mullions to chimney-top like the isle itself, of stone. Inside the window, the moonlight irradiating her winding-sheet, lay Avice, reached only by the faint noises inherent in the isle; the tink-tink of the chisels in the quarries, the surging of the tides in the Bay, and the muffled grumbling of the currents in the never-pacified Race.

He began to divine the truth. Avice, the departed one, though she had come short of inspiring a passion, had yet possessed a ground-quality absent from her rivals, without which it seemed that a fixed and full-rounded constancy to a woman could not flourish in him. Like his own, her family had been islanders for centuries--from Norman, Anglian, Roman, Balearic-British times. Hence in her nature, as in his, was some mysterious ingredient sucked from the isle; otherwise a racial instinct necessary to the absolute unison of a pair. Thus, though he might never love a woman of the island race, for lack in her of the desired refinement, he could not love long a kimberlin--a woman other than of the island race, for her lack of this groundwork of character.

Such was Pierston's view of things. Another fancy of his, an artist's superstition merely, may be mentioned. The Caros, like some other local families, suggested a Roman lineage, more or less grafted on the stock of the Slingers. Their features recalled those of the Italian peasantry

to any one as familiar as he was with them; and there were evidences that the Roman colonists had been populous and long-abiding in and near this corner of Britain. Tradition urged that a temple to Venus once stood at the top of the Roman road leading up into the isle; and possibly one to the love-goddess of the Slingers antedated this. What so natural as that the true star of his soul would be found nowhere but in one of the old island breed?

After dinner his old friend Somers came in to smoke, and when they had talked a little while Somers alluded casually to some place at which they would meet on the morrow.

'I sha'n't be there,' said Pierston.

'But you promised?'

'Yes. But I shall be at the island--looking at a dead woman's grave.'
As he spoke his eyes turned, and remained fixed on a table near. Somers followed the direction of his glance to a photograph on a stand.

'Is that she?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Rather a bygone affair, then?'

Pierston acknowledged it. 'She's the only sweetheart I ever slighted, Alfred,' he said. 'Because she's the only one I ought to have cared for. That's just the fool I have always been.'

'But if she's dead and buried, you can go to her grave at any time as well as now, to keep up the sentiment.'

'I don't know that she's buried.'

'But to-morrow--the Academy night! Of all days why go then?'

'I don't care about the Academy.'

'Pierston--you are our only inspired sculptor. You are our Praxiteles, or rather our Lysippus. You are almost the only man of this generation who has been able to mould and chisel forms living enough to draw the idle public away from the popular paintings into the usually deserted Lecture-room, and people who have seen your last pieces of stuff say there has been nothing like them since sixteen hundred and--since the sculptors 'of the great race' lived and died--whenever that was. Well, then, for the sake of others you ought not to rush off to that God-forgotten sea-rock just when you are wanted in town, all for a woman

you last saw a hundred years ago.'

'No--it was only nineteen and three quarters,' replied his friend, with abstracted literalness. He went the next morning.

Since the days of his youth a railway had been constructed along the pebble bank, so that, except when the rails were washed away by the tides, which was rather often, the peninsula was quickly accessible. At two o'clock in the afternoon he was rattled along by this new means of locomotion, under the familiar monotonous line of bran-coloured stones, and he soon emerged from the station, which stood as a strange exotic among the black lerrets, the ruins of the washed-away village, and the white cubes of oolite, just come to view after burial through unreckonable geologic years.

In entering upon the pebble beach the train had passed close to the ruins of Henry the Eighth's or Sandsfoot Castle, whither Avice was to have accompanied him on the night of his departure. Had she appeared the primitive betrothal, with its natural result, would probably have taken place; and, as no islander had ever been known to break that compact, she would have become his wife.

Ascending the steep incline to where the quarrymen were chipping just as they had formerly done, and within sound of the great stone saws, he looked southward towards the Beal.

The level line of the sea horizon rose above the surface of the isle, a ruffled patch in mid-distance as usual marking the Race, whence many a Lycidas had gone

'Visiting the bottom of the monstrous world;'

but had not been blest with a poet as a friend. Against the stretch of water, where a school of mackerel twinkled in the afternoon light, was defined, in addition to the distant lighthouse, a church with its tower, standing about a quarter of a mile off, near the edge of the cliff. The churchyard gravestones could be seen in profile against the same vast spread of watery babble and unrest.

Among the graves moved the form of a man clothed in a white sheet, which the wind blew and flapped coldly every now and then. Near him moved six men bearing a long box, and two or three persons in black followed. The coffin, with its twelve legs, crawled across the isle, while around and beneath it the flashing lights from the sea and the school of mackerel were reflected; a fishing-boat, far out in the Channel, being momentarily discernible under the coffin also.

The procession wandered round to a particular corner, and halted, and

paused there a long while in the wind, the sea behind them, the surplice of the priest still blowing. Jocelyn stood with his hat off: he was present, though he was a quarter of a mile off; and he seemed to hear the words that were being said, though nothing but the wind was audible.

He instinctively knew that it was none other than Avice whom he was seeing interred; HIS Avice, as he now began presumptuously to call her. Presently the little group withdrew from before the sea-shine, and disappeared.

He felt himself unable to go further in that direction, and turning aside went aimlessly across the open land, visiting the various spots that he had formerly visited with her. But, as if tethered to the churchyard by a cord, he was still conscious of being at the end of a radius whose pivot was the grave of Avice Caro; and as the dusk thickened he closed upon his centre and entered the churchyard gate.

Not a soul was now within the precincts. The grave, newly shaped, was easily discoverable behind the church, and when the same young moon arose which he had observed the previous evening from his window in London he could see the yet fresh foot-marks of the mourners and bearers. The breeze had fallen to a calm with the setting of the sun: the lighthouse had opened its glaring eye, and, disinclined to leave a spot sublimed both by early association and present regret, he moved back to the church-wall, warm from the afternoon sun, and sat down upon a window-sill facing the grave.