

## 2. IV. SHE THREATENS TO RESUME CORPOREAL SUBSTANCE

The lispings of the sea beneath the cliffs were all the sounds that reached him, for the quarries were silent now. How long he sat here lonely and thinking he did not know. Neither did he know, though he felt drowsy, whether inexpectant sadness--that gentle soporific--lulled him into a short sleep, so that he lost count of time and consciousness of incident. But during some minute or minutes he seemed to see Avice Caro herself, bending over and then withdrawing from her grave in the light of the moon.

She seemed not a year older, not a digit less slender, not a line more angular than when he had parted from her twenty years earlier, in the lane hard by. A renascent reasoning on the impossibility of such a phenomenon as this being more than a dream-fancy roused him with a start from his heaviness.

'I must have been asleep,' he said.

Yet she had seemed so real. Pierston however dismissed the strange impression, arguing that even if the information sent him of Avice's death should be false--a thing incredible--that sweet friend of his youth, despite the transfiguring effects of moonlight, would not now look the same as she had appeared nineteen or twenty years ago. Were what he saw substantial flesh, it must have been some other person than Avice Caro.

Having satisfied his sentiment by coming to the graveside there was nothing more for him to do in the island, and he decided to return to London that night. But some time remaining still on his hands, Jocelyn by a natural instinct turned his feet in the direction of East Quarriers, the village of his birth and of hers. Passing the market-square he pursued the arm of road to 'Sylvania Castle,' a private mansion of comparatively modern date, in whose grounds stood the single plantation of trees of which the isle could boast. The cottages extended close to the walls of the enclosure, and one of the last of these dwellings had been Avice's, in which, as it was her freehold, she possibly had died.

To reach it he passed the gates of 'Sylvania,' and observed above the lawn wall a board announcing that the house was to be let furnished. A few steps further revealed the cottage which with its quaint and massive stone features of two or three centuries' antiquity, was capable even now of longer resistance to the rasp of Time than ordinary new erections. His attention was drawn to the window, still unblinded, though a lamp lit the room. He stepped back against the wall opposite, and gazed in.

At a table covered with a white cloth a young woman stood putting tea-things away into a corner-cupboard. She was in all respects the Avice he had lost, the girl he had seen in the churchyard and had fancied to be the illusion of a dream. And though there was this time no doubt about her reality, the isolation of her position in the silent house lent her a curiously startling aspect. Divining the explanation he waited for footsteps, and in a few moments a quarryman passed him on his journey home. Pierston inquired of the man concerning the spectacle.

'O yes, sir; that's poor Mrs. Caro's only daughter, and it must be lonely for her there to-night, poor maid! Yes, good-now; she's the very daps of her mother--that's what everybody says.'

'But how does she come to be so lonely?'

'One of her brothers went to sea and was drowned, and t'other is in America.'

'They were quarryowners at one time?'

The quarryman 'pitched his nitch,' and explained to the seeming stranger that there had been three families thereabouts in the stone trade, who had got much involved with each other in the last generation. They were the Bencombs, the Pierstons, and the Caros. The Bencombs strained their utmost to outlift the other two, and partially succeeded. They grew enormously rich, sold out, and disappeared altogether from the island which had been their making. The Pierstons kept a dogged middle course, throve without show or noise, and also retired in their turn. The Caros were pulled completely down in the competition with the other two, and when Widow Caro's daughter married her cousin Jim Caro, he tried to regain for the family its original place in the three-cornered struggle. He took contracts at less than he could profit by, speculated more and more, till at last the crash came; he was sold up, went away, and later on came back to live in this little cottage, which was his wife's by inheritance. There he remained till his death; and now his widow was gone. Hardships had helped on her end.

The quarryman proceeded on his way, and Pierston, deeply remorseful, knocked at the door of the minute freehold. The girl herself opened it, lamp in hand.

'Avice!' he said tenderly; 'Avice Caro!' even now unable to get over the strange feeling that he was twenty years younger, addressing Avice the forsaken.

'Ann, sir,' said she.

'Ah, your name is not the same as your mother's!'

'My second name is. And my surname. Poor mother married her cousin.'

'As everybody does here.... Well, Ann or otherwise, you are Avice to me. And you have lost her now?'

'I have, sir.'

She spoke in the very same sweet voice that he had listened to a score of years before, and bent eyes of the same familiar hazel inquiringly upon him.

'I knew your mother at one time,' he said; 'and learning of her death and burial I took the liberty of calling upon you. You will forgive a stranger doing that?'

'Yes,' she said dispassionately, and glancing round the room: 'This was mother's own house, and now it is mine. I am sorry not to be in mourning on the night of her funeral, but I have just been to put some flowers on her grave, and I took it off afore going that the damp mid not spoil the crape. You see, she was bad a long time, and I have to be careful, and do washing and ironing for a living. She hurt her side with wringing up the large sheets she had to wash for the Castle folks here.'

'I hope you won't hurt yourself doing it, my dear.'

'O no, that I sha'n't! There's Charl Woollat, and Sammy Scribben, and Ted Gibsey, and lots o' young chaps; they'll wring anything for me if they happen to come along. But I can hardly trust 'em. Sam Scribben t'other day twisted a linen tablecloth into two pieces, for all the world as if it had been a pipe-light. They never know when to stop in their wringing.'

The voice truly was his Avice's; but Avice the Second was clearly more matter-of-fact, unreflecting, less cultivated than her mother had been. This Avice would never recite poetry from any platform, local or other, with enthusiastic appreciation of its fire. There was a disappointment in his recognition of this; yet she touched him as few had done: he could not bear to go away. 'How old are you?' he asked.

'Going in nineteen.'

It was about the age of her double, Avice the First, when he and she had strolled together over the cliffs during the engagement. But he was now forty, if a day. She before him was an uneducated laundress, and he was a sculptor and a Royal Academician, with a fortune and a reputation. Yet why was it an unpleasant sensation to him just then to recollect that he was two score?

He could find no further excuse for remaining, and having still half-an-hour to spare he went round by the road to the other or west side of the last-century 'Sylvania Castle,' and came to the furthest house out there on the cliff. It was his early home. Used in the summer as a lodging-house for visitors, it now stood empty and silent, the evening wind swaying the euonymus and tamarisk boughs in the front--the only evergreen shrubs that could weather the whipping salt gales which sped past the walls. Opposite the house, far out at sea, the familiar lightship winked from the sandbank, and all at once there came to him a wild wish--that, instead of having an artist's reputation, he could be living here an illiterate and unknown man, wooing, and in a fair way of winning, the pretty laundress in the cottage hard by.