

## 2. V. THE RESUMPTION TAKES PLACE

Having returned to London he mechanically resumed his customary life; but he was not really living there. The phantom of Avice, now grown to be warm flesh and blood, held his mind afar. He thought of nothing but the isle, and Avice the Second dwelling therein--inhaling its salt breath, stroked by its singing rains and by the haunted atmosphere of Roman Venus about and around the site of her perished temple there. The very defects in the country girl became charms as viewed from town.

Nothing now pleased him so much as to spend that portion of the afternoon which he devoted to out-door exercise, in haunting the purlieus of the wharves along the Thames, where the stone of his native rock was unshipped from the coasting-craft that had brought it thither. He would pass inside the great gates of these landing-places on the right or left bank, contemplate the white cubes and oblongs, imbibe their associations, call up the genius loci whence they came, and almost forget that he was in London.

One afternoon he was walking away from the mud-splashed entrance to one of the wharves, when his attention was drawn to a female form on the opposite side of the way, going towards the spot he had just left. She was somewhat small, slight, and graceful; her attire alone would have been enough to attract him, being simple and countrified to picturesqueness; but he was more than attracted by her strong resemblance to Avice Caro the younger--Ann Avice, as she had said she was called.

Before she had receded a hundred yards he felt certain that it was Avice indeed; and his unifying mood of the afternoon was now so intense that the lost and the found Avice seemed essentially the same person. Their external likeness to each other--probably owing to the cousinship between the elder and her husband--went far to nourish the fantasy. He hastily turned, and rediscovered the girl among the pedestrians. She kept on her way to the wharf, where, looking inquiringly around her for a few seconds, with the manner of one unaccustomed to the locality, she opened the gate and disappeared.

Pierston also went up to the gate and entered. She had crossed to the landing-place, beyond which a lumpy craft lay moored. Drawing nearer, he discovered her to be engaged in conversation with the skipper and an elderly woman--both come straight from the oolitic isle, as was apparent in a moment from their accent. Pierston felt no hesitation in making himself known as a native, the ruptured engagement between Avice's mother and himself twenty years before having been known to few or none now living.

The present embodiment of Avice recognized him, and with the artless

candour of her race and years explained the situation, though that was rather his duty as an intruder than hers.

'This is Cap'n Kibbs, sir, a distant relation of father's,' she said.  
'And this is Mrs. Kibbs. We've come up from the island wi'en just for a trip, and are going to sail back wi'en Wednesday.'

'O, I see. And where are you staying?'

'Here--on board.'

'What, you live on board entirely?'

'Yes.'

'Lord, sir,' broke in Mrs. Kibbs, 'I should be afeard o' my life to tine my eyes among these here kimberlins at night-time; and even by day, if so be I venture into the streets, I nowhen forget how many turnings to the right and to the left 'tis to get back to Job's vessel--do I, Job?'

The skipper nodded confirmation.

'You are safer ashore than afloat,' said Pierston, 'especially in the Channel, with these winds and those heavy blocks of stone.'

'Well,' said Cap'n Kibbs, after privately clearing something from his mouth, 'as to the winds, there idden much danger in them at this time o' year. 'Tis the ocean-bound steamers that make the risk to craft like ours. If you happen to be in their course, under you go--cut clane in two pieces, and they never lying-to to haul in your carcasses, and nobody to tell the tale.'

Pierston turned to Avice, wanting to say much to her, yet not knowing what to say. He lamely remarked at last: 'You go back the same way, Avice?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well, take care of yourself afloat.'

'O yes.'

'I hope--I may see you again soon--and talk to you.'

'I hope so, sir.'

He could not get further, and after a while Pierston left them, and went away thinking of Avice more than ever.

The next day he mentally timed them down the river, allowing for the pause to take in ballast, and on the Wednesday pictured the sail down the open sea. That night he thought of the little craft under the bows of the huge steam-vessels, powerless to make itself seen or heard, and Avice, now growing inexpressibly dear, sleeping in her little berth at the mercy of a thousand chance catastrophes.

Honest perception had told him that this Avice, fairer than her mother in face and form, was her inferior in soul and understanding. Yet the fervour which the first could never kindle in him was, almost to his alarm, burning up now. He began to have misgivings as to some queer trick that his migratory Beloved was about to play him, or rather the capricious Divinity behind that ideal lady.

A gigantic satire upon the mutations of his nymph during the past twenty years seemed looming in the distance. A forsaking of the accomplished and well-connected Mrs. Pine-Avon for the little laundress, under the traction of some mystic magnet which had nothing to do with reason--surely that was the form of the satire.

But it was recklessly pleasant to leave the suspicion unrecognized as yet, and follow the lead.

In thinking how best to do this Pierston recollected that, as was customary when the summer-time approached, Sylvania Castle had been advertised for letting furnished. A solitary dreamer like himself, whose wants all lay in an artistic and ideal direction, did not require such gaunt accommodation as the aforesaid residence offered; but the spot was all, and the expenses of a few months of tenancy therein he could well afford. A letter to the agent was dispatched that night, and in a few days Jocelyn found himself the temporary possessor of a place which he had never seen the inside of since his childhood, and had then deemed the abode of unpleasant ghosts.