

2. VI. THE PAST SHINES IN THE PRESENT

It was the evening of Pierston's arrival at Sylvania Castle, a dignified manor-house in a nook by the cliffs, with modern castellations and battlements; and he had walked through the rooms, about the lawn, and into the surrounding plantation of elms, which on this island of treeless rock lent a unique character to the enclosure. In name, nature, and accessories the property within the girdling wall formed a complete antithesis to everything in its precincts. To find other trees between Pebble-bank and Beal, it was necessary to recede a little in time--to dig down to a loose stratum of the underlying stone-beds, where a forest of conifers lay as petrifications, their heads all in one direction, as blown down by a gale in the Secondary geologic epoch.

Dusk had closed in, and he now proceeded with what was, after all, the real business of his sojourn. The two servants who had been left to take care of the house were in their own quarters, and he went out unobserved. Crossing a hollow overhung by the budding boughs he approached an empty garden-house of Elizabethan design, which stood on the outer wall of the grounds, and commanded by a window the fronts of the nearest cottages. Among them was the home of the resuscitated Avice.

He had chosen this moment for his outlook through knowing that the villagers were in no hurry to pull down their blinds at nightfall. And, as he had divined, the inside of the young woman's living-room was visible to him as formerly, illuminated by the rays of its own lamp.

A subdued thumping came every now and then from the apartment. She was ironing linen on a flannel table-cloth, a row of such apparel hanging on a clothes-horse by the fire. Her face had been pale when he encountered her, but now it was warm and pink with her exertions and the heat of the stove. Yet it was in perfect and passionless repose, which imparted a Minerva cast to the profile. When she glanced up, her lineaments seemed to have all the soul and heart that had characterized her mother's, and had been with her a true index of the spirit within. Could it be possible that in this case the manifestation was fictitious? He had met with many such examples of hereditary persistence without the qualities signified by the traits. He unconsciously hoped that it was at least not entirely so here.

The room was less furnished than when he had last beheld it. The 'bo-fet,' or double corner-cupboard, where the china was formerly kept, had disappeared, its place being taken by a plain board. The tall old clock, with its ancient oak carcass, arched brow, and humorous mouth, was also not to be seen, a cheap, white-dialled specimen doing its work. What these displacements might betoken saddened his humanity less than it cheered his primitive instinct in pointing out how her necessities

might bring them together.

Having fixed his residence near her for some lengthy time he felt in no hurry to obtrude his presence just now, and went indoors. That this girl's frame was doomed to be a real embodiment of that olden seductive one--that Protean dream-creature, who had never seen fit to irradiate the mother's image till it became a mere memory after dissolution--he doubted less every moment.

There was an uneasiness in recognizing such. There was something abnormal in his present proclivity. A certain sanity had, after all, accompanied his former idealizing passions: the Beloved had seldom informed a personality which, while enrapturing his soul, simultaneously shocked his intellect. A change, perhaps, had come.

It was a fine morning on the morrow. Walking in the grounds towards the gate he saw Avice entering his hired castle with a broad oval wicker-basket covered with a white cloth, which burden she bore round to the back door. Of course, she washed for his own household: he had not thought of that. In the morning sunlight she appeared rather as a sylph than as a washerwoman; and he could not but think that the slightness of her figure was as ill adapted to this occupation as her mother's had been.

But, after all, it was not the washerwoman that he saw now. In front of her, on the surface of her, was shining out that more real, more inter-penetrating being whom he knew so well! The occupation of the subserving minion, the blemishes of the temporary creature who formed the background, were of the same account in the presentation of the indispensable one as the supporting posts and framework in a pyrotechnic display.

She left the house and went homeward by a path of which he was not aware, having probably changed her course because she had seen him standing there. It meant nothing, for she had hardly become acquainted with him; yet that she should have avoided him was a new experience. He had no opportunity for a further study of her by distant observation, and hit upon a pretext for bringing her face to face with him. He found fault with his linen, and directed that the laundress should be sent for.

'She is rather young, poor little thing,' said the housemaid apologetically. 'But since her mother's death she has enough to do to keep above water, and we make shift with her. But I'll tell her, sir.'

'I will see her myself. Send her in when she comes,' said Pierston.

One morning, accordingly, when he was answering a spiteful criticism

of a late work of his, he was told that she waited his pleasure in the hall. He went out.

'About the washing,' said the sculptor stiffly. 'I am a very particular person, and I wish no preparation of lime to be used.'

'I didn't know folks used it,' replied the maiden, in a scared and reserved tone, without looking at him.

'That's all right. And then, the mangling smashes the buttons.'

'I haven't got a mangle, sir,' she murmured.

'Ah! that's satisfactory. And I object to so much borax in the starch.'

'I don't put any,' Avice returned in the same close way; 'never heard the name o't afore!'

'O I see.'

All this time Pierston was thinking of the girl--or as the scientific might say, Nature was working her plans for the next generation under the cloak of a dialogue on linen. He could not read her individual character, owing to the confusing effect of her likeness to a woman whom he had valued too late. He could not help seeing in her all that he knew of another, and veiling in her all that did not harmonize with his sense of metempsychosis.

The girl seemed to think of nothing but the business in hand. She had answered to the point, and was hardly aware of his sex or of his shape.

'I knew your mother, Avice,' he said. 'You remember my telling you so?'

'Yes.'

'Well--I have taken this house for two or three months, and you will be very useful to me. You still live just outside the wall?'

'Yes, sir,' said the self-contained girl.

Demurely and dispassionately she turned to leave--this pretty creature with features so still. There was something strange in seeing move off thus that form which he knew passing well, she who was once so throbbingly alive to his presence that, not many yards from this spot, she had flung her arms round him and given him a kiss which, despised in its freshness, had revived in him latterly as the dearest kiss of all his life. And now this 'daps' of her mother (as they called her in the dialect here), this perfect copy, why did she turn away?

'Your mother was a refined and well-informed woman, I think I remember?'

'She was, sir; everybody said so.'

'I hope you resemble her.'

She archly shook her head, and drew warily away.

'O! one thing more, Avice. I have not brought much linen, so you must come to the house every day.'

'Very good, sir.'

'You won't forget that?'

'O no.'

Then he let her go. He was a town man, and she an artless islander, yet he had opened himself out, like a sea-anemone, without disturbing the epiderm of her nature. It was monstrous that a maiden who had assumed the personality of her of his tenderest memory should be so impervious. Perhaps it was he who was wanting. Avice might be Passion masking as Indifference, because he was so many years older in outward show.

This brought him to the root of it. In his heart he was not a day older than when he had wooed the mother at the daughter's present age. His record moved on with the years, his sentiments stood still.

When he beheld those of his fellows who were defined as buffers and fogeys--imperturbable, matter-of-fact, slightly ridiculous beings, past masters in the art of populating homes, schools, and colleges, and present adepts in the science of giving away brides--how he envied them, assuming them to feel as they appeared to feel, with their commerce and their politics, their glasses and their pipes. They had got past the distracting currents of passionateness, and were in the calm waters of middle-aged philosophy. But he, their contemporary, was tossed like a cork hither and thither upon the crest of every fancy, precisely as he had been tossed when he was half his present age, with the burden now of double pain to himself in his growing vision of all as vanity.

Avice had gone, and he saw her no more that day. Since he could not again call upon her, she was as inaccessible as if she had entered the military citadel on the hill-top beyond them.

In the evening he went out and paced down the lane to the Red King's castle overhanging the cliff, beside whose age the castle he occupied was but a thing of yesterday. Below the castle precipice lay enormous

blocks, which had fallen from it, and several of them were carved over with names and initials. He knew the spot and the old trick well, and by searching in the faint moon-rays he found a pair of names which, as a boy, he himself had cut. They were 'AVICE' and 'JOCELYN'--Avice Caro's and his own. The letters were now nearly worn away by the weather and the brine. But close by, in quite fresh letters, stood 'ANN AVICE,' coupled with the name 'ISAAC.' They could not have been there more than two or three years, and the 'Ann Avice' was probably Avice the Second. Who was Isaac? Some boy admirer of her child-time doubtless.

He retraced his steps, and passed the Caros' house towards his own. The revived Avice animated the dwelling, and the light within the room fell upon the window. She was just inside that blind.

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Whenever she unexpectedly came to the castle he started, and lost placidity. It was not at her presence as such, but at the new condition, which seemed to have something sinister in it. On the other hand, the most abrupt encounter with him moved her to no emotion as it had moved her prototype in the old days. She was indifferent to, almost unconscious of, his propinquity. He was no more than a statue to her; she was a growing fire to him.

A sudden Sapphic terror of love would ever and anon come upon the sculptor, when his matured reflecting powers would insist upon informing him of the fearful lapse from reasonableness that lay in this infatuation. It threw him into a sweat. What if now, at last, he were doomed to do penance for his past emotional wanderings (in a material sense) by being chained in fatal fidelity to an object that his intellect despised? One night he dreamt that he saw dimly masking behind that young countenance 'the Weaver of Wiles' herself, 'with all her subtle face laughing aloud.'

However, the Well-Beloved was alive again, had been lost and was found. He was amazed at the change of front in himself. She had worn the guise of strange women; she had been a woman of every class, from the dignified daughter of some ecclesiastic or peer to a Nubian Almeh with her handkerchief, undulating to the beats of the tom-tom; but all these embodiments had been endowed with a certain smartness, either of the flesh or spirit: some with wit, a few with talent, and even genius. But the new impersonation had apparently nothing beyond sex and prettiness. She knew not how to sport a fan or handkerchief, hardly how to pull on a glove.

But her limited life was innocent, and that went far. Poor little Avice!

her mother's image: there it all lay. After all, her parentage was as good as his own; it was misfortune that had sent her down to this. Odd as it seemed to him, her limitations were largely what he loved her for. Her rejuvenating power over him had ineffable charm. He felt as he had felt when standing beside her predecessor; but, alas! he was twenty years further on towards the shade.