

2. VIII. HIS OWN SOUL CONFRONTS HIM

From his roomy castle and its grounds and the cliffs hard by he could command every move and aspect of her who was the rejuvenated Spirit of the Past to him--in the effulgence of whom all sordid details were disregarded.

Among other things he observed that she was often anxious when it rained. If, after a wet day, a golden streak appeared in the sky over Deadman's Bay, under a lid of cloud, her manner was joyous and her tread light.

This puzzled him; and he found that if he endeavoured to encounter her at these times she shunned him--stealthily and subtly, but unmistakably. One evening, when she had left her cottage and tripped off in the direction of the under-hill townlet, he set out by the same route, resolved to await her return along the high roadway which stretched between that place and East Quarriers.

He reached the top of the old road where it makes a sudden descent to the townlet, but she did not appear. Turning back, he sauntered along till he had nearly reached his own house again. Then he retraced his steps, and in the dim night he walked backwards and forwards on the bare and lofty convex of the isle; the stars above and around him, the lighthouse on duty at the distant point, the lightship winking from the sandbank, the combing of the pebble beach by the tide beneath, the church away south-westward, where the island fathers lay.

He walked the wild summit till his legs ached, and his heart ached--till he seemed to hear on the upper wind the stones of the slingers whizzing past, and the voices of the invaders who annihilated them, and married their wives and daughters, and produced Avice as the ultimate flower of the combined stocks. Still she did not come. It was more than foolish to wait, yet he could not help waiting. At length he discerned a dot of a figure, which he knew to be hers rather by its motion than by its shape.

How incomparably the immaterial dream dwarfed the grandest of substantial things, when here, between those three sublimities--the sky, the rock, and the ocean--the minute personality of this washer-girl filled his consciousness to its extremest boundary, and the stupendous inanimate scene shrank to a corner therein.

But all at once the approaching figure had disappeared. He looked about; she had certainly vanished. At one side of the road was a low wall, but she could not have gone behind that without considerable trouble and singular conduct. He looked behind him; she had reappeared further on the road.

Jocelyn Pierston hurried after; and, discerning his movement, Avice stood still. When he came up, she was sily shaking with restrained laughter.

'Well, what does this mean, my dear girl?' he asked.

Her inner mirth escaping in spite of her she turned askance and said: 'When you was following me to Street o' Wells, two hours ago, I looked round and saw you, and huddled behind a stone! You passed and brushed my frock without seeing me. And when, on my way backalong, I saw you waiting hereabout again, I slipped over the wall, and ran past you! If I had not stopped and looked round at 'ee, you would never have caught me!'

'What did you do that for, you elf!'

'That you shouldn't find me.'

'That's not exactly a reason. Give another, dear Avice,' he said, as he turned and walked beside her homeward.

She hesitated. 'Come!' he urged again.

'Twas because I thought you wanted to be my young man,' she answered.

'What a wild thought of yours! Supposing I did, wouldn't you have me?'

'Not now.... And not for long, even if it had been sooner than now.'

'Why?'

'If I tell you, you won't laugh at me or let anybody else know?'

'Never.'

'Then I will tell you,' she said quite seriously. "'Tis because I get tired o' my lovers as soon as I get to know them well. What I see in one young man for a while soon leaves him and goes into another yonder, and I follow, and then what I admire fades out of him and springs up somewhere else; and so I follow on, and never fix to one. I have loved FIFTEEN a'ready! Yes, fifteen, I am almost ashamed to say,' she repeated, laughing. 'I can't help it, sir, I assure you. Of course it is really, to ME, the same one all through, on'y I can't catch him!' She added anxiously, 'You won't tell anybody o' this in me, will you, sir? Because if it were known I am afraid no man would like me.'

Pierston was surprised into stillness. Here was this obscure and almost illiterate girl engaged in the pursuit of the impossible ideal, just as

he had been himself doing for the last twenty years. She was doing it quite involuntarily, by sheer necessity of her organization, puzzled all the while at her own instinct. He suddenly thought of its bearing upon himself, and said, with a sinking heart--

'Am I--one of them?'

She pondered critically.

'You was; for a week; when I first saw you.'

'Only a week?'

'About that.'

'What made the being of your fancy forsake my form and go elsewhere?'

'Well--though you seemed handsome and gentlemanly at first--'

'Yes?'

'I found you too old soon after.'

'You are a candid young person.'

'But you asked me, sir!' she expostulated.

'I did; and, having been answered, I won't intrude upon you longer. So cut along home as fast as you can. It is getting late.'

When she had passed out of earshot he also followed homewards. This seeking of the Well-Beloved was, then, of the nature of a knife which could cut two ways. To be the seeker was one thing: to be one of the corpses from which the ideal inhabitant had departed was another; and this was what he had become now, in the mockery of new Days.

The startling parallel in the idiosyncracies of Avice and himself--evinced by the elusiveness of the Beloved with her as with him--meant probably that there had been some remote ancestor common to both families, from whom the trait had latently descended and recrudesced. But the result was none the less disconcerting.

Drawing near his own gate he smelt tobacco, and could discern two figures in the side lane leading past Avice's door. They did not, however, enter her house, but strolled onward to the narrow pass conducting to Red-King Castle and the sea. He was in momentary heaviness at the thought that they might be Avice with a worthless lover, but a faintly argumentative tone from the man informed him that they were the

same married couple going homeward whom he had encountered on a previous occasion.

The next day he gave the servants a half-holiday to get the pretty Avice into the castle again for a few hours, the better to observe her. While she was pulling down the blinds at sunset a whistle of peculiar quality came from some point on the cliffs outside the lawn. He observed that her colour rose slightly, though she bustled about as if she had noticed nothing.

Pierston suddenly suspected that she had not only fifteen past admirers but a current one. Still, he might be mistaken. Stimulated now by ancient memories and present tenderness to use every effort to make her his wife, despite her conventional unfitness, he strung himself up to sift this mystery. If he could only win her--and how could a country girl refuse such an opportunity?--he could pack her off to school for two or three years, marry her, enlarge her mind by a little travel, and take his chance of the rest. As to her want of ardour for him--so sadly in contrast with her sainted mother's affection--a man twenty years older than his bride could expect no better, and he would be well content to put up with it in the pleasure of possessing one in whom seemed to linger as an aroma all the charm of his youth and his early home.