

## 2. IX. JUXTAPOSITIONS

It was a sad and leaden afternoon, and Pierston paced up the long, steep pass or street of the Wells. On either side of the road young girls stood with pitchers at the fountains which bubbled there, and behind the houses forming the propylaea of the rock rose the massive forehead of the Isle--crested at this part with its enormous ramparts as with a mural crown.

As you approach the upper end of the street all progress seems about to be checked by the almost vertical face of the escarpment. Into it your track apparently runs point-blank: a confronting mass which, if it were to slip down, would overwhelm the whole town. But in a moment you find that the road, the old Roman highway into the peninsula, turns at a sharp angle when it reaches the base of the scarp, and ascends in the stiffest of inclines to the right. To the left there is also another ascending road, modern, almost as steep as the first, and perfectly straight. This is the road to the forts.

Pierston arrived at the forking of the ways, and paused for breath. Before turning to the right, his proper and picturesque course, he looked up the uninteresting left road to the fortifications. It was new, long, white, regular, tapering to a vanishing point, like a lesson in perspective. About a quarter of the way up a girl was resting beside a basket of white linen: and by the shape of her hat and the nature of her burden he recognized her.

She did not see him, and abandoning the right-hand course he slowly ascended the incline she had taken. He observed that her attention was absorbed by something aloft. He followed the direction of her gaze. Above them towered the green-grey mountain of grassy stone, here levelled at the top by military art. The skyline was broken every now and then by a little peg-like object--a sentry-box; and near one of these a small red spot kept creeping backwards and forwards monotonously against the heavy sky.

Then he divined that she had a soldier-lover.

She turned her head, saw him, and took up her clothes-basket to continue the ascent. The steepness was such that to climb it unencumbered was a breathless business; the linen made her task a cruelty to her. 'You'll never get to the forts with that weight,' he said. 'Give it to me.'

But she would not, and he stood still, watching her as she panted up the way; for the moment an irradiated being, the epitome of a whole sex: by the beams of his own infatuation

'..... robed in such exceeding glory

That he beheld her not;'

beheld her not as she really was, as she was even to himself sometimes. But to the soldier what was she? Smaller and smaller she waned up the rigid mathematical road, still gazing at the soldier aloft, as Pierston gazed at her. He could just discern sentinels springing up at the different coigns of vantage that she passed, but seeing who she was they did not intercept her; and presently she crossed the drawbridge over the enormous chasm surrounding the forts, passed the sentries there also, and disappeared through the arch into the interior. Pierston could not see the sentry now, and there occurred to him the hateful idea that this scarlet rival was meeting and talking freely to her, the unprotected orphan girl of his sweet original Avic; perhaps, relieved of duty, escorting her across the interior, carrying her basket, her tender body encircled by his arm.

'What the devil are you staring at, as if you were in a trance?'

Pierston turned his head: and there stood his old friend Somers--still looking the long-leased bachelor that he was.

'I might say what the devil do you do here? if I weren't so glad to see you.'

Somers said that he had come to see what was detaining his friend in such an out-of-the-way place at that time of year, and incidentally to get some fresh air into his own lungs. Pierston made him welcome, and they went towards Sylvania Castle.

'You were staring, as far as I could see, at a pretty little washerwoman with a basket of clothes?' resumed the painter.

'Yes; it was that to you, but not to me. Behind the mere pretty island-girl (to the world) is, in my eye, the Idea, in Platonic phraseology--the essence and epitome of all that is desirable in this existence.... I am under a doom, Somers. Yes, I am under a doom. To have been always following a phantom whom I saw in woman after woman while she was at a distance, but vanishing away on close approach, was bad enough; but now the terrible thing is that the phantom does NOT vanish, but stays to tantalize me even when I am near enough to see what it is! That girl holds me, THOUGH my eyes are open, and THOUGH I see that I am a fool!'

Somers regarded the visionary look of his friend, which rather intensified than decreased as his years wore on, but made no further remark. When they reached the castle Somers gazed round upon the scenery, and Pierston, signifying the quaint little Elizabethan cottage,

said: 'That's where she lives.'

'What a romantic place!--and this island altogether. A man might love a scarecrow or turnip-lantern here.'

'But a woman mightn't. Scenery doesn't impress them, though they pretend it does. This girl is as fickle as--'

'You once were.'

'Exactly--from your point of view. She has told me so--candidly. And it hits me hard.'

Somers stood still in sudden thought. 'Well--that IS a strange turning of the tables!' he said. 'But you wouldn't really marry her, Pierston?'

'I would--to-morrow. Why shouldn't I? What are fame and name and society to me--a descendant of wreckers and smugglers, like her. Besides, I know what she's made of, my boy, to her innermost fibre; I know the perfect and pure quarry she was dug from: and that gives a man confidence.'

'Then you'll win.'

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While they were sitting after dinner that evening their quiet discourse was interrupted by the long low whistle from the cliffs without. Somers took no notice, but Pierston marked it. That whistle always occurred at the same time in the evening when Avice was helping in the house. He excused himself for a moment to his visitor and went out upon the dark lawn. A crunching of feet upon the gravel mixed in with the articulation of the sea--steps light as if they were winged. And he supposed, two minutes later, that the mouth of some hulking fellow was upon hers, which he himself hardly ventured to look at, so touching was its young beauty.

Hearing people about--among others the before-mentioned married couple quarrelling, the woman's tones having a kinship to Avice's own--he returned to the house. Next day Somers roamed abroad to look for scenery for a marine painting, and, going out to seek him, Pierston met Avice.

'So you have a lover, my lady!' he said severely. She admitted that it was the fact. 'You won't stick to him,' he continued.

'I think I may to THIS one,' said she, in a meaning tone that he failed to fathom then. 'He deserted me once, but he won't again.'

'I suppose he's a wonderful sort of fellow?'

'He's good enough for me.'

'So handsome, no doubt.'

'Handsome enough for me.'

'So refined and respectable.'

'Refined and respectable enough for me.'

He could not disturb her equanimity, and let her pass. The next day was Sunday, and Somers having chosen his view at the other end of the island, Pierston determined in the afternoon to see Avice's lover. He found that she had left her cottage stronghold, and went on towards the lighthouses at the Beal. Turning back when he had reached the nearest, he saw on the lonely road between the quarries a young man evidently connected with the stone trade, with Avice the Second upon his arm.

She looked prettily guilty and blushed a little under his glance. The man's was one of the typical island physiognomies--his features energetic and wary in their expression, and half covered with a close, crisp black beard. Pierston fancied that out of his keen dark eyes there glimmered a dry sense of humour at the situation.

If so, Avice must have told him of Pierston's symptoms of tenderness. This girl, whom, for her dear mother's sake more than for her own unquestionable attractiveness, he would have guarded as the apple of his eye, how could she estimate him so flippantly!

The mortification of having brought himself to this position with the antitype, by his early slight of the type, blinded him for the moment to what struck him a short time after. The man upon whose arm she hung was not a soldier. What, then, became of her entranced gaze at the sentinel? She could hardly have transferred her affections so promptly; or, to give her the benefit of his own theory, her Beloved could scarcely have flitted from frame to frame in so very brief an interval. And which of them had been he who whistled softly in the dusk to her?

Without further attempt to find Alfred Somers Pierston walked homeward, moodily thinking that the desire to make reparation to the original woman by wedding and enriching the copy--which lent such an unprecedented permanence to his new love--was thwarted, as if by set intention of his destiny.

At the door of the grounds about the castle there stood a carriage.

He observed that it was not one of the homely flies from the under-hill town, but apparently from the popular resort across the bay. Wondering why the visitor had not driven in he entered, to find in the drawing-room Nichola Pine-Avon.

At his first glance upon her, fashionably dressed and graceful in movement, she seemed beautiful; at the second, when he observed that her face was pale and agitated, she seemed pathetic likewise. Altogether, she was now a very different figure from her who, sitting in her chair with such finished composure, had snubbed him in her drawing-room in Hamptonshire Square.

'You are surprised at this? Of course you are!' she said, in a low, pleading voice, languidly lifting her heavy eyelids, while he was holding her hand. 'But I couldn't help it! I know I have done something to offend you--have I not? O! what can it be, that you have come away to this outlandish rock, to live with barbarians in the midst of the London season?'

'You have not offended me, dear Mrs. Pine-Avon,' he said. 'How sorry I am that you should have supposed it! Yet I am glad, too, that your fancy should have done me the good turn of bringing you here to see me.'

'I am staying at Budmouth-Regis,' she explained.

'Then I did see you at a church-service here a little while back?'

She blushed faintly upon her pallor, and she sighed. Their eyes met. 'Well,' she said at last, 'I don't know why I shouldn't show the virtue of candour. You know what it means. I was the stronger once; now I am the weaker. Whatever pain I may have given you in the ups and downs of our acquaintance I am sorry for, and would willingly repair all errors of the past by--being amenable to reason in the future.'

It was impossible that Jocelyn should not feel a tender impulsion towards this attractive and once independent woman, who from every worldly point of view was an excellent match for him--a superior match, indeed, except in money. He took her hand again and held it awhile, and a faint wave of gladness seemed to flow through her. But no--he could go no further. That island girl, in her coquettish Sunday frock and little hat with its bunch of cock's feathers held him as by strands of Manila rope. He dropped Nichola's hand.

'I am leaving Budmouth to-morrow,' she said. 'That was why I felt I must call. You did not know I had been there all through the Whitsun holidays?'

'I did not, indeed; or I should have come to see you.'

'I didn't like to write. I wish I had, now!'

'I wish you had, too, dear Mrs. Pine-Avon.'

But it was 'Nichola' that she wanted to be. As they reached the landau he told her that he should be back in town himself again soon, and would call immediately. At the moment of his words Avice Caro, now alone, passed close along by the carriage on the other side, towards her house hard at hand. She did not turn head or eye to the pair: they seemed to be in her view objects of indifference.

Pierston became cold as a stone. The chill towards Nichola that the presence of the girl,--sprite, witch, troll that she was--brought with it came like a doom. He knew what a fool he was, as he had said. But he was powerless in the grasp of the idealizing passion. He cared more for Avice's finger-tips than for Mrs. Pine-Avon's whole personality.

Perhaps Nichola saw it, for she said mournfully: 'Now I have done all I could! I felt that the only counterpoise to my cruelty to you in my drawing-room would be to come as a suppliant to yours.'

'It is most handsome and noble of you, my very dear friend!' said he, with an emotion of courtesy rather than of enthusiasm.

Then adieux were spoken, and she drove away. But Pierston saw only the retreating Avice, and knew that he was helpless in her hands. The church of the island had risen near the foundations of the Pagan temple, and a Christian emanation from the former might be wrathfully torturing him through the very false gods to whom he had devoted himself both in his craft, like Demetrius of Ephesus, and in his heart. Perhaps Divine punishment for his idolatries had come.