

2. X. SHE FAILS TO VANISH STILL

Pierston had not turned far back towards the castle when he was overtaken by Somers and the man who carried his painting lumber. They paced together to the door; the man deposited the articles and went away, and the two walked up and down before entering.

'I met an extremely interesting woman in the road out there,' said the painter.

'Ah, she is! A sprite, a sylph; Psyche indeed!'

'I was struck with her.'

'It shows how beauty will out through the homeliest guise.'

'Yes, it will; though not always. And this case doesn't prove it, for the lady's attire was in the latest and most approved taste.'

'Oh, you mean the lady who was driving?'

'Of course. What, were you thinking of the pretty little cottage-girl outside here? I did meet her, but what's she? Very well for one's picture, though hardly for one's fireside. This lady--'

'Is Mrs. Pine-Avon. A kind, proud woman, who'll do what people with no pride would not condescend to think of. She is leaving Budmouth to-morrow, and she drove across to see me. You know how things seemed to be going with us at one time? But I am no good to any woman. She's been very generous towards me, which I've not been to her.... She'll ultimately throw herself away upon some wretch unworthy of her, no doubt.'

'Do you think so?' murmured Somers. After a while he said abruptly, 'I'll marry her myself, if she'll have me. I like the look of her.'

'I wish you would, Alfred, or rather could! She has long had an idea of slipping out of the world of fashion into the world of art. She is a woman of individuality and earnest instincts. I am in real trouble about her. I won't say she can be won--it would be ungenerous of me to say that. But try. I can bring you together easily.'

'I'll marry her, if she's willing!' With the phlegmatic dogmatism that was part of him, Somers added: 'When you have decided to marry, take the first nice woman you meet. They are all alike.'

'Well--you don't know her yet,' replied Jocelyn, who could give praise where he could not give love.

'But you do, and I'll take her on the strength of your judgment. Is she really handsome?--I had but the merest glance. But I know she is, or she wouldn't have caught your discriminating eye.'

'You may take my word for it; she looks as well at hand as afar.'

'What colour are her eyes?'

'Her eyes? I don't go much in for colour, being professionally sworn to form. But, let me see--grey; and her hair rather light than dark brown.'

'I wanted something darker,' said Somers airily. 'There are so many fair models among native Englishwomen. Still, blondes are useful property!... Well, well; this is flippancy. But I liked the look of her.'

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Somers had gone back to town. It was a wet day on the little peninsula: but Pierston walked out as far as the garden-house of his hired castle, where he sat down and smoked. This erection being on the boundary-wall of his property his ear could now and then catch the tones of Avice's voice from her open-doored cottage in the lane which skirted his fence; and he noticed that there were no modulations in it. He knew why that was. She wished to go out, and could not. He had observed before that when she was planning an outing a particular note would come into her voice during the preceding hours: a dove's roundness of sound; no doubt the effect upon her voice of her thoughts of her lover, or lovers. Yet the latter it could not be. She was pure and singlehearted: half an eye could see that. Whence, then, the two men? Possibly the quarrier was a relation.

There seemed reason in this when, going out into the lane, he encountered one of the red jackets he had been thinking of. Soldiers were seldom seen in this outer part of the isle: their beat from the forts, when on pleasure, was in the opposite direction, and this man must have had a special reason for coming hither. Pierston surveyed him. He was a round-faced, good-humoured fellow to look at, having two little pieces of moustache on his upper lip, like a pair of minnows rampant, and small black eyes, over which the Glengarry cap straddled flat. It was a hateful idea that her tender cheek should be kissed by the lips of this heavy young man, who had never been sublimed by a single battle, even with defenceless savages.

The soldier went before her house, looked at the door, and moved on down the crooked way to the cliffs, where there was a path back to the forts.

But he did not adopt it, returning by the way he had come. This showed his wish to pass the house again. She gave no sign, however, and the soldier disappeared.

Pierston could not be satisfied that Avice was in the house, and he crossed over to the front of her little freehold and tapped at the door, which stood ajar.

Nobody came: hearing a slight movement within he crossed the threshold. Avice was there alone, sitting on a low stool in a dark corner, as though she wished to be unobserved by any casual passer-by. She looked up at him without emotion or apparent surprise; but he could then see that she was crying. The view, for the first time, of distress in an unprotected young girl towards whom he felt drawn by ties of extraordinary delicacy and tenderness, moved Pierston beyond measure. He entered without ceremony.

'Avice, my dear girl!' he said. 'Something is the matter!'

She looked assent, and he went on: 'Now tell me all about it. Perhaps I can help you. Come, tell me.'

'I can't!' she murmured. 'Grammer Stockwool is upstairs, and she'll hear!' Mrs. Stockwool was the old woman who had come to live with the girl for company since her mother's death.

'Then come into my garden opposite. There we shall be quite private.'

She rose, put on her hat, and accompanied him to the door. Here she asked him if the lane were empty, and on his assuring her that it was she crossed over and entered with him through the garden-wall.

The place was a shady and secluded one, though through the boughs the sea could be seen quite near at hand, its moanings being distinctly audible. A water-drop from a tree fell here and there, but the rain was not enough to hurt them.

'Now let me hear it,' he said soothingly. 'You may tell me with the greatest freedom. I was a friend of your mother's, you know. That is, I knew her; and I'll be a friend of yours.'

The statement was risky, if he wished her not to suspect him of being her mother's false one. But that lover's name appeared to be unknown to the present Avice.

'I can't tell you, sir,' she replied unwillingly; 'except that it has to do with my own changeableness. The rest is the secret of somebody else.'

'I am sorry for that,' said he.

'I am getting to care for one I ought not to think of, and it means ruin. I ought to get away!'

'You mean from the island?'

'Yes.'

Pierston reflected. His presence in London had been desired for some time; yet he had delayed going because of his new solitudes here. But to go and take her with him would afford him opportunity of watching over her, tending her mind, and developing it; while it might remove her from some looming danger. It was a somewhat awkward guardianship for him, as a lonely man, to carry out; still, it could be done. He asked her abruptly if she would really like to go away for a while.

'I like best to stay here,' she answered. 'Still, I should not mind going somewhere, because I think I ought to.'

'Would you like London?'

Avice's face lost its weeping shape. 'How could that be?' she said.

'I have been thinking that you could come to my house and make yourself useful in some way. I rent just now one of those new places called flats, which you may have heard of; and I have a studio at the back.'

'I haven't heard of 'em,' she said without interest.

'Well, I have two servants there, and as my man has a holiday you can help them for a month or two.'

'Would polishing furniture be any good? I can do that.'

'I haven't much furniture that requires polishing. But you can clear away plaster and clay messes in the studio, and chippings of stone, and help me in modelling, and dust all my Venus failures, and hands and heads and feet and bones, and other objects.'

She was startled, yet attracted by the novelty of the proposal.

'Only for a time?' she said.

'Only for a time. As short as you like, and as long.'

The deliberate manner in which, after the first surprise, Avice

discussed the arrangements that he suggested, might have told him how far was any feeling for himself beyond friendship, and possibly gratitude, from agitating her breast. Yet there was nothing extravagant in the discrepancy between their ages, and he hoped, after shaping her to himself, to win her. What had grieved her to tears she would not more particularly tell.

She had naturally not much need of preparation, but she made even less preparation than he would have expected her to require. She seemed eager to be off immediately, and not a soul was to know of her departure. Why, if she were in love and at first averse to leave the island, she should be so precipitate now he failed to understand.

But he took great care to compromise in no way a girl in whom his interest was as protective as it was passionate. He accordingly left her to get out of the island alone, awaiting her at a station a few miles up the railway, where, discovering himself to her through the carriage-window, he entered the next compartment, his frame pervaded by a glow which was almost joy at having for the first time in his charge one who inherited the flesh and bore the name so early associated with his own, and at the prospect of putting things right which had been wrong through many years.