

2. XI. THE IMAGE PERSISTS

It was dark when the four-wheeled cab wherein he had brought Avice from the station stood at the entrance to the pile of flats of which Pierston occupied one floor--rarer then as residences in London than they are now. Leaving Avice to alight and get the luggage taken in by the porter Pierston went upstairs. To his surprise his floor was silent, and on entering with a latchkey the rooms were all in darkness. He descended to the hall, where Avice was standing helpless beside the luggage, while the porter was outside with the cabman.

'Do you know what has become of my servants?' asked Jocelyn.

'What--and ain't they there, saur? Ah, then my belief is that what I suspected is thruel! You didn't leave your wine-cellar unlocked, did you, saur, by no mistake?'

Pierston considered. He thought he might have left the key with his elder servant, whom he had believed he could trust, especially as the cellar was not well stocked.

'Ah, then it was so! She's been very queer, saur, this last week or two. O yes, sending messages down the spakin'-tube which were like madness itself, and ordering us this and that, till we would take no notice at all. I see them both go out last night, and possibly they went for a holiday not expecting ye, or maybe for good! Shure, if ye'd written, saur, I'd ha' got the place ready, ye being out of a man, too, though it's not me duty at all!'

When Pierston got to his floor again he found that the cellar door was open; some bottles were standing empty that had been full, and many abstracted altogether. All other articles in the house, however, appeared to be intact. His letter to his housekeeper lay in the box as the postman had left it.

By this time the luggage had been sent up in the lift; and Avice, like so much more luggage, stood at the door, the hall-porter behind offering his assistance.

'Come here, Avice,' said the sculptor. 'What shall we do now? Here's a pretty state of affairs!'

Avice could suggest nothing, till she was struck with the bright thought that she should light a fire.

'Light a fire?--ah, yes.... I wonder if we could manage. This is an odd coincidence--and awkward!' he murmured. 'Very well, light a fire.'

'Is this the kitchen, sir, all mixed up with the parlours?'

'Yes.'

'Then I think I can do all that's wanted here for a bit; at any rate, till you can get help, sir. At least, I could if I could find the fuel-house. 'Tis no such big place as I thought!'

'That's right: take courage!' said he with a tender smile. 'Now, I'll dine out this evening, and leave the place for you to arrange as best you can with the help of the porter's wife downstairs.'

This Pierston accordingly did, and so their common residence began. Feeling more and more strongly that some danger awaited her in her native island he determined not to send her back till the lover or lovers who seemed to trouble her should have cooled off. He was quite willing to take the risk of his action thus far in his solicitous regard for her.

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It was a dual solitude, indeed; for, though Pierston and Avice were the only two people in the flat, they did not keep each other company, the former being as scrupulously fearful of going near her now that he had the opportunity as he had been prompt to seek her when he had none. They lived in silence, his messages to her being frequently written on scraps of paper deposited where she could see them. It was not without a pang that he noted her unconsciousness of their isolated position--a position to which, had she experienced any reciprocity of sentiment, she would readily have been alive.

Considering that, though not profound, she was hardly a matter-of-fact girl as that phrase is commonly understood, she was exasperating in the matter-of-fact quality of her responses to the friendly remarks which would escape him in spite of himself, as well as in her general conduct. Whenever he formed some culinary excuse for walking across the few yards of tessellated hall which separated his room from the kitchen, and spoke through the doorway to her, she answered, 'Yes, sir,' or 'No, sir,' without turning her eyes from the particular work that she was engaged in.

In the usual course he would have obtained a couple of properly qualified servants immediately; but he lived on with the one, or rather the less than one, that this cottage-girl afforded. It had been his almost invariable custom to dine at one of his clubs. Now he sat at home over the miserable chop or steak to which he limited himself in dread

lest she should complain of there being too much work for one person, and demand to be sent home. A charwoman came every two or three days, effecting an extraordinary consumption of food and alcoholic liquids: yet it was not for this that Pierston dreaded her presence, but lest, in conversing with Avice, she should open the girl's eyes to the oddity of her situation. Avice could see for herself that there must have been two or three servants in the flat during his former residence there: but his reasons for doing without them seemed never to strike her.

His intention had been to keep her occupied exclusively at the studio, but accident had modified this. However, he sent her round one morning, and entering himself shortly after found her engaged in wiping the layers of dust from the casts and models.

The colour of the dust never ceased to amaze her. 'It is like the hold of a Budmouth collier,' she said, 'and the beautiful faces of these clay people are quite spoilt by it.'

'I suppose you'll marry some day, Avice?' remarked Pierston, as he regarded her thoughtfully.

'Some do and some don't,' she said, with a reserved smile, still attending to the casts.'

'You are very offhand,' said he.

She archly weighed that remark without further speech. It was tantalizing conduct in the face of his instinct to cherish her; especially when he regarded the charm of her bending profile; the well-characterized though softly lined nose, the round chin with, as it were, a second leap in its curve to the throat, and the sweep of the eyelashes over the rosy cheek during the sedulously lowered glance. How futilely he had laboured to express the character of that face in clay, and, while catching it in substance, had yet lost something that was essential!

That evening after dusk, in the stress of writing letters, he sent her out for stamps. She had been absent some quarter of an hour when, suddenly drawing himself up from over his writing-table, it flashed upon him that he had absolutely forgotten her total ignorance of London.

The head post-office, to which he had sent her because it was late, was two or three streets off, and he had made his request in the most general manner, which she had acceded to with alacrity enough. How could he have done such an unreflecting thing?

Pierston went to the window. It was half-past nine o'clock, and owing to her absence the blinds were not down. He opened the casement and stepped

out upon the balcony. The green shade of his lamp screened its rays from the gloom without. Over the opposite square the moon hung, and to the right there stretched a long street, filled with a diminishing array of lamps, some single, some in clusters, among them an occasional blue or red one. From a corner came the notes of a piano-organ strumming out a stirring march of Rossini's. The shadowy black figures of pedestrians moved up, down, and across the embrowned roadway. Above the roofs was a bank of livid mist, and higher a greenish-blue sky, in which stars were visible, though its lower part was still pale with daylight, against which rose chimney-pots in the form of elbows, prongs, and fists.

From the whole scene proceeded a ground rumble, miles in extent, upon which individual rattles, voices, a tin whistle, the bark of a dog, rode like bubbles on a sea. The whole noise impressed him with the sense that no one in its enormous mass ever required rest.

In this illimitable ocean of humanity there was a unit of existence, his Avice, wandering alone.

Pierston looked at his watch. She had been gone half an hour. It was impossible to distinguish her at this distance, even if she approached. He came inside, and putting on his hat determined to go out and seek her. He reached the end of the street, and there was nothing of her to be seen. She had the option of two or three routes from this point to the post-office; yet he plunged at random into one, till he reached the office to find it quite deserted. Almost distracted now by his anxiety for her he retreated as rapidly as he had come, regaining home only to find that she had not returned.

He recollected telling her that if she should ever lose her way she must call a cab and drive home. It occurred to him that this was what she would do now. He again went out upon the balcony; the dignified street in which he lived was almost vacant, and the lamps stood like placed sentinels awaiting some procession which tarried long. At a point under him where the road was torn up there stood a red light, and at the corner two men were talking in leisurely repose, as if sunning themselves at noonday. Lovers of a feline disposition, who were never seen by daylight, joked and darted at each other in and out of area gates.

His attention was fixed on the cabs, and he held his breath as the hollow clap of each horse's hoofs drew near the front of the house, only to go onward into the square. The two lamps of each vehicle afar dilated with its near approach, and seemed to swerve towards him. It was Avice surely? No, it passed by.

Almost frantic he again descended and let himself out of the house, moving towards a more central part, where the roar still continued.

Before emerging into the noisy thoroughfare he observed a small figure approaching leisurely along the opposite side, and hastened across to find it was she.