

2. XII. A GRILLE DESCENDS BETWEEN

'O Avice!' he cried, with the tenderly subdued scolding of a mother.
'What is this you have done to alarm me so!'

She seemed unconscious of having done anything, and was altogether surprised at his anxiety. In his relief he did not speak further till he asked her suddenly if she would take his arm since she must be tired.

'O no, sir!' she assured him, 'I am not a bit tired, and I don't require any help at all, thank you.'

They went upstairs without using the lift, and he let her and himself in with his latchkey. She entered the kitchen, and he, following, sat down in a chair there.

'Where have you been?' he said, with almost angered concern on his face.
'You ought not to have been absent more than ten minutes.'

'I knew there was nothing for me to do, and thought I should like to see a little of London,' she replied naively. 'So when I had got the stamps I went on into the fashionable streets, where ladies are all walking about just as if it were daytime! 'Twas for all the world like coming home by night from Martinmas Fair at the Street o' Wells, only more genteel.'

'O Avice, Avice, you must not go out like this! Don't you know that I am responsible for your safety? I am your--well, guardian, in fact, and am bound by law and morals, and I don't know what-all, to deliver you up to your native island without a scratch or blemish. And yet you indulge in such a midnight vagary as this!'

'But I am sure, sir, the gentlemen in the street were more respectable than they are anywhere at home! They were dressed in the latest fashion, and would have scorned to do me any harm; and as to their love-making, I never heard anything so polite before.'

'Well, you must not do it again. I'll tell you some day why. What's that you have in your hand?'

'A mouse-trap. There are lots of mice in this kitchen--sooty mice, not clean like ours--and I thought I'd try to catch them. That was what I went so far to buy, as there were no shops open just about here. I'll set it now.'

She proceeded at once to do so, and Pierston remained in his seat regarding the operation, which seemed entirely to engross her. It was extraordinary, indeed, to observe how she wilfully limited her

interests; with what content she received the ordinary things that life offered, and persistently refused to behold what an infinitely extended life lay open to her through him. If she had only said the word he would have got a licence and married her the next morning. Was it possible that she did not perceive this tendency in him? She could hardly be a woman if she did not; and in her airy, elusive, offhand demeanour she was very much of a woman indeed.

'It only holds one mouse,' he said absently.

'But I shall hear it throw in the night, and set it again.'

He sighed and left her to her own resources and retired to rest, though he felt no tendency to sleep. At some small hour of the darkness, owing, possibly, to some intervening door being left open, he heard the mouse-trap click. Another light sleeper must have heard it too, for almost immediately after the pit-pat of naked feet, accompanied by the brushing of drapery, was audible along the passage towards the kitchen. After her absence in that apartment long enough to reset the trap, he was startled by a scream from the same quarter. Pierston sprang out of bed, jumped into his dressing-gown, and hastened in the direction of the cry.

Avice, barefooted and wrapped in a shawl, was standing in a chair; the mouse-trap lay on the floor, the mouse running round and round in its neighbourhood.

'I was trying to take en out,' said she excitedly, 'and he got away from me!'

Pierston secured the mouse while she remained standing on the chair. Then, having set the trap anew, his feeling burst out petulantly--

'A girl like you to throw yourself away upon such a commonplace fellow as that quarryman! Why do you do it!'

Her mind was so intently fixed upon the matter in hand that it was some moments before she caught his irrelevant subject. 'Because I am a foolish girl,' she said quietly.

'What! Don't you love him?' said Jocelyn, with a surprised stare up at her as she stood, in her concern appearing the very Avice who had kissed him twenty years earlier.

'It is not much use to talk about that,' said she.

'Then, is it the soldier?'

'Yes, though I have never spoken to him.'

'Never spoken to the soldier?'

'Never.'

'Has either one treated you badly--deceived you?'

'No. Certainly not.'

'Well, I can't make you out; and I don't wish to know more than you choose to tell me. Come, Avice, why not tell me exactly how things are?'

'Not now, sir!' she said, her pretty pink face and brown eyes turned in simple appeal to him from her pedestal. 'I will tell you all to-morrow; an that I will!'

He retreated to his own room and lay down meditating. Some quarter of an hour after she had retreated to hers the mouse-trap clicked again, and Pierston raised himself on his elbow to listen. The place was so still and the jerry-built door-panels so thin that he could hear the mouse jumping about inside the wires of the trap. But he heard no footstep this time. As he was wakeful and restless he again arose, proceeded to the kitchen with a light, and removing the mouse reset the trap. Returning he listened once more. He could see in the far distance the door of Avice's room; but that thoughtful housewife had not heard the second capture. From the room came a soft breathing like that of an infant.

He entered his own chamber and reclined himself gloomily enough. Her lack of all consciousness of him, the aspect of the deserted kitchen, the cold grate, impressed him with a deeper sense of loneliness than he had ever felt before.

Foolish he was, indeed, to be so devoted to this young woman. Her defencelessness, her freedom from the least thought that there lurked a danger in their propinquity, were in fact secondary safeguards, not much less strong than that of her being her mother's image, against risk to her from him. Yet it was out of this that his depression came.

At sight of her the next morning Pierston felt that he must put an end to such a state of things. He sent Avice off to the studio, wrote to an agent for a couple of servants, and then went round to his work. Avice was busy righting all that she was allowed to touch. It was the girl's delight to be occupied among the models and casts, which for the first time she regarded with the wistful interest of a soul struggling to receive ideas of beauty vaguely discerned yet ever eluding her. That brightness in her mother's mind which might have descended to the second

Avice with the maternal face and form, had been dimmed by admixture with the mediocrity of her father's, and by one who remembered like Pierston the dual organization the opposites could be often seen wrestling internally.

They were alone in the studio, and his feelings found vent. Putting his arms round her he said, 'My darling, sweet little Avice! I want to ask you something--surely you guess what? I want to know this: will you be married to me, and live here with me always and ever?'

'O, Mr. Pierston, what nonsense!'

'Nonsense?' said he, shrinking somewhat.

'Yes, sir.'

'Well, why? Am I too old? Surely there's no serious difference?'

'O no--I should not mind that if it came to marrying. The difference is not much for husband and wife, though it is rather much for keeping company.'

She struggled to get free, and when in the movement she knocked down the Empress Faustina's head he did not try to retain her. He saw that she was not only surprised but a little alarmed.

'You haven't said why it is nonsense!' he remarked tartly.

'Why, I didn't know you was thinking of me like that. I hadn't any thought of it! And all alone here! What shall I do?'

'Say yes, my pretty Avice! We'll then go out and be married at once, and nobody be any the wiser.'

She shook her head. 'I couldn't, sir.'

'It would be well for you. You don't like me, perhaps?'

'Yes I do--very much. But not in that sort of way--quite. Still, I might have got to love you in time, if--'

'Well, then, try,' he said warmly. 'Your mother did!'

No sooner had the words slipped out than Pierston would have recalled them. He had felt in a moment that they jeopardized his cause.

'Mother loved you?' said Avice, incredulously gazing at him.

'Yes,' he murmured.

'You were not her false young man, surely? That one who--'

'Yes, yes! Say no more about it.'

'Who ran away from her?'

'Almost.'

'Then I can NEVER, NEVER like you again! I didn't know it was a gentleman--I--I thought--'

'It wasn't a gentleman, then.'

'O, sir, please go away! I can't bear the sight of 'ee at this moment! Perhaps I shall get to--to like you as I did; but--'

'No; I'm d----d if I'll go away!' said Pierston, thoroughly irritated. 'I have been candid with you; you ought to be the same with me!'

'What do you want me to tell?'

'Enough to make it clear to me why you don't accept this offer. Everything you have said yet is a reason for the reverse. Now, my dear, I am not angry.'

'Yes you are.'

'No I'm not. Now what is your reason?'

'The name of it is Isaac Pierston, down home.'

'How?'

'I mean he courted me, and led me on to island custom, and then I went to chapel one morning and married him in secret, because mother didn't care about him; and I didn't either by that time. And then he quarrelled with me; and just before you and I came to London he went away to Guernsey. Then I saw a soldier; I never knew his name, but I fell in love with him because I am so quick at that! Still, as it was wrong, I tried not to think of him, and wouldn't look at him when he passed. But it made me cry very much that I mustn't. I was then very miserable, and you asked me to come to London. I didn't care what I did with myself, and I came.'

'Heaven above us!' said Pierston, his pale and distressed face showing with what a shock this announcement had come. 'Why have you done such

extraordinary things? Or, rather, why didn't you tell me of this before? Then, at the present moment you are the wife of a man who is in Guernsey, whom you do not love at all; but instead of him love a soldier whom you have never spoken to; while I have nearly brought scandal upon us both by your letting me love you. Really, you are a very wicked woman!

'No, I am not!' she pouted.

Still, Avice looked pale and rather frightened, and did not lift her eyes from the floor. 'I said it was nonsense in you to want to have me!' she went on, 'and, even if I hadn't been married to that horrid Isaac Pierston, I couldn't have married you after you told me that you was the man who ran away from my mother.'

'I have paid the penalty!' he said sadly. 'Men of my sort always get the worst of it somehow. Though I never did your mother any harm. Now, Avice--I'll call you dear Avice for your mother's sake and not for your own--I must see what I can do to help you out of the difficulty that unquestionably you are in. Why can't you love your husband now you have married him?'

Avice looked aside at the statuary as if the subtleties of her organization were not very easy to define.

'Was he that black-bearded typical local character I saw you walking with one Sunday? The same surname as mine; though, of course, you don't notice that in a place where there are only half-a-dozen surnames?'

'Yes, that was Ike. It was that evening we disagreed. He scolded me, and I answered him (you must have heard us); and the next day he went away.'

'Well, as I say, I must consider what it will be best to do for you in this. The first thing, it seems to me, will be to get your husband home.'

She impatiently shrugged her shoulders. 'I don't like him!'

'Then why did you marry him?'

'I was obliged to, after we'd proved each other by island custom.'

'You shouldn't have thought of such a thing. It is ridiculous and out of date nowadays.'

'Ah, he's so old-fashioned in his notions that he doesn't think like that. However, he's gone.'

'Ah--it is only a tiff between you, I dare say. I'll start him in business if he'll come.... Is the cottage at home still in your hands?'

'Yes, it is my freehold. Grammer Stockwool is taking care o' it for me.'

'Good. And back there you go straightway, my pretty madam, and wait till your husband comes to make it up with you.'

'I won't go!--I don't want him to come!' she sobbed. 'I want to stay here with you, or anywhere, except where he can come!'

'You will get over that. Now, go back to the flat, there's a dear Avice, and be ready in one hour, waiting in the hall for me.'

'I don't want to!'

'But I say you shall!'

She found it was no use to disobey. Precisely at the moment appointed he met her there himself, burdened only with a valise and umbrella, she with a box and other things. Directing the porter to put Avice and her belongings into a four-wheeled cab for the railway-station, he walked onward from the door, and kept looking behind, till he saw the cab approaching. He then entered beside the astonished girl, and onward they went together.

They sat opposite each other in an empty compartment, and the tedious railway journey began. Regarding her closely now by the light of her revelation he wondered at himself for never divining her secret. Whenever he looked at her the girl's eyes grew rebellious, and at last she wept.

'I don't want to go to him!' she sobbed in a miserable voice.

Pierston was almost as much distressed as she. 'Why did you put yourself and me in such a position?' he said bitterly. 'It is no use to regret it now! And I can't say that I do. It affords me a way out of a trying position. Even if you had not been married to him you would not have married me!'

'Yes, I would, sir.'

'What! You would? You said you wouldn't not long ago.'

'I like you better now! I like you more and more!'

Pierston sighed, for emotionally he was not much older than she. That hitch in his development, rendering him the most lopsided of God's

creatures, was his standing misfortune. A proposal to her which crossed his mind was dismissed as disloyalty, particularly to an inexperienced fellow-islander and one who was by race and traditions almost a kinswoman.

Little more passed between the twain on that wretched, never-to-be-forgotten day. Aphrodite, Ashtaroth, Freyja, or whoever the love-queen of his isle might have been, was punishing him sharply, as she knew but too well how to punish her votaries when they reverted from the ephemeral to the stable mood. When was it to end--this curse of his heart not ageing while his frame moved naturally onward? Perhaps only with life.

His first act the day after depositing her in her own house was to go to the chapel where, by her statement, the marriage had been solemnized, and make sure of the fact. Perhaps he felt an illogical hope that she might be free, even then, in the tarnished condition which such freedom would have involved. However, there stood the words distinctly: Isaac Pierston, Ann Avice Caro, son and daughter of So-and-so, married on such a day, signed by the contracting parties, the officiating minister, and the two witnesses.