

2. XIII. SHE IS ENSHROUDED FROM SIGHT

One evening in early winter, when the air was dry and gusty, the dark little lane which divided the grounds of Sylvania Castle from the cottage of Avice, and led down to the adjoining ruin of Red-King Castle, was paced by a solitary man. The cottage was the centre of his beat; its western limit being the gates of the former residence, its eastern the drawbridge of the ruin. The few other cottages thereabout--all as if carved from the solid rock--were in darkness, but from the upper window of Avice's tiny freehold glimmered a light. Its rays were repeated from the far-distant sea by the lightship lying moored over the mysterious Shambles quicksand, which brought tamelessness and domesticity into due position as balanced opposites.

The sea moaned--more than moaned--among the boulders below the ruins, a throe of its tide being timed to regular intervals. These sounds were accompanied by an equally periodic moan from the interior of the cottage chamber; so that the articulate heave of water and the articulate heave of life seemed but differing utterances of the selfsame troubled terrestrial Being--which in one sense they were.

Pierston--for the man in the lane was he--would look from lightship to cottage window; then back again, as he waited there between the travail of the sea without, and the travail of the woman within. Soon an infant's wail of the very feeblest was also audible in the house. He started from his easy pacing, and went again westward, standing at the elbow of the lane a long time. Then the peace of the sleeping village which lay that way was broken by light wheels and the trot of a horse. Pierston went back to the cottage gate and awaited the arrival of the vehicle.

It was a light cart, and a man jumped down as it stopped. He was in a broad-brimmed hat, under which no more of him could be perceived than that he wore a black beard clipped like a yew fence--a typical aspect in the island.

'You are Avice's husband?' asked the sculptor quickly.

The man replied that he was, in the local accent. 'I've just come in by to-day's boat,' he added. 'I couldn't git here avore. I had contracted for the job at Peter-Port, and had to see to't to the end.'

'Well,' said Pierston, 'your coming means that you are willing to make it up with her?'

'Ay, I don't know but I be,' said the man. 'Mid so well do that as anything else!'

'If you do, thoroughly, a good business in your old line awaits you here in the island.'

'Wi' all my heart, then,' said the man. His voice was energetic, and, though slightly touchy, it showed, on the whole, a disposition to set things right.

The driver of the trap was paid off, and Jocelyn and Isaac Pierston--undoubtedly scions of a common stock in this isle of intermarriages, though they had no proof of it--entered the house. Nobody was in the ground-floor room, in the centre of which stood a square table, in the centre of the table a little wool mat, and in the centre of the mat a lamp, the apartment having the appearance of being rigidly swept and set in order for an event of interest.

The woman who lived in the house with Avice now came downstairs, and to the inquiry of the comers she replied that matters were progressing favourably, but that nobody could be allowed to go upstairs just then. After placing chairs and viands for them she retreated, and they sat down, the lamp between them--the lover of the sufferer above, who had no right to her, and the man who had every right to her, but did not love her. Engaging in desultory and fragmentary conversation they listened to the trampling of feet on the floor-boards overhead--Pierston full of anxiety and attentiveness, Ike awaiting the course of nature calmly.

Soon they heard the feeble bleats repeated, and then the local practitioner descended and entered the room.

'How is she now?' said Pierston, the more taciturn Ike looking up with him for the answer that he felt would serve for two as well as for one.

'Doing well, remarkably well,' replied the professional gentleman, with a manner of having said it in other places; and his vehicle not being at the door he sat down and shared some refreshment with the others. When he had departed Mrs. Stockwool again stepped down, and informed them that Ike's presence had been made known to his wife.

The truant quarrier seemed rather inclined to stay where he was and finish the mug of ale, but Pierston quickened him, and he ascended the staircase. As soon as the lower room was empty Pierston leant with his elbows on the table, and covered his face with his hands.

Ike was absent no great time. Descending with a proprietary mien that had been lacking before, he invited Jocelyn to ascend likewise, since she had stated that she would like to see him. Jocelyn went up the crooked old steps, the husband remaining below.

Avice, though white as the sheets, looked brighter and happier than he

had expected to find her, and was apparently very much fortified by the pink little lump at her side. She held out her hand to him.

'I just wanted to tell 'ee,' she said, striving against her feebleness, 'I thought it would be no harm to see you, though 'tis rather soon--to tell 'ee how very much I thank you for getting me settled again with Ike. He is very glad to come home again, too, he says. Yes, you've done a good many kind things for me, sir.'

Whether she were really glad, or whether the words were expressed as a matter of duty, Pierston did not attempt to learn.

He merely said that he valued her thanks. 'Now, Avice,' he added tenderly, 'I resign my guardianship of you. I hope to see your husband in a sound little business here in a very short time.'

'I hope so--for baby's sake,' she said, with a bright sigh. 'Would you--like to see her, sir?'

'The baby? O yes--YOUR baby! You must christen her Avice.'

'Yes--so I will!' she murmured readily, and disclosed the infant with some timidity. 'I hope you forgive me, sir, for concealing my thoughtless marriage!'

'If you forgive me for making love to you.'

'Yes. How were you to know! I wish--'

Pierston bade her good-bye, kissing her hand; turned from her and the incipient being whom he was to meet again under very altered conditions, and left the bed-chamber with a tear in his eye.

'Here endeth that dream!' said he.

Hymen, in secret or overt guise, seemed to haunt Pierston just at this time with undignified mockery which savoured rather of Harlequin than of the torch-bearer. Two days after parting in a lone island from the girl he had so disinterestedly loved he met in Piccadilly his friend Somers, wonderfully spruced up, and hastening along with a preoccupied face.

'My dear fellow,' said Somers, 'what do you think! I was charged not to tell you, but, hang it! I may just as well make a clean breast of it now as later.'

'What--you are not going to...' began Pierston, with divination.

'Yes. What I said on impulse six months back I am about to carry out in cold blood. Nichola and I began in jest and ended in earnest. We are going to take one another next month for good and all.'

PART THIRD -- A YOUNG MAN OF SIXTY

'In me thou seest the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie
As the death-bed whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.'

--W. SHAKESPEARE.