

3. I. SHE RETURNS FOR THE NEW SEASON

Twenty years had spread their films over the events which wound up with the reunion of the second Avice and her husband; and the hoary peninsula called an island looked just the same as before; though many who had formerly projected their daily shadows upon its unrelieved summer whiteness ceased now to disturb the colourless sunlight there.

The general change, nevertheless, was small. The silent ships came and went from the wharf, the chisels clinked in the quarries; file after file of whitey-brown horses, in strings of eight or ten, painfully dragged down the hill the square blocks of stone on the antediluvian wooden wheels just as usual. The lightship winked every night from the quicksands to the Beal Lantern, and the Beal Lantern glared through its eye-glass on the ship. The canine gnawing audible on the Pebble-bank had been repeated ever since at each tide, but the pebbles remained undevoured.

Men drank, smoked, and spat in the inns with only a little more adulteration in their refreshments and a trifle less dialect in their speech than of yore. But one figure had never been seen on the Channel rock in the interval, the form of Pierston the sculptor, whose first use of the chisel that rock had instigated.

He had lived abroad a great deal, and, in fact, at this very date he was staying at an hotel in Rome. Though he had not once set eyes on Avice since parting from her in the room with her firstborn, he had managed to obtain tidings of her from time to time during the interval. In this way Pierston learnt that, shortly after their resumption of a common life in her house, Ike had ill-used her, till fortunately, the business to which Jocelyn had assisted him chancing to prosper, he became immersed in its details, and allowed Avice to pursue her household courses without interference, initiating that kind of domestic reconciliation which is so calm and durable, having as its chief ingredient neither hate nor love, but an all-embracing indifference.

At first Pierston had sent her sums of money privately, fearing lest her husband should deny her material comforts; but he soon found, to his great relief, that such help was unnecessary, social ambition prompting Ike to set up as quite a gentleman-islander, and to allow Avice a scope for show which he would never have allowed in mere kindness.

Being in Rome, as aforesaid, Pierston returned one evening to his hotel to dine, after spending the afternoon among the busts in the long gallery of the Vatican. The unconscious habit, common to so many people, of tracing likes in unlikes had often led him to discern, or to fancy he discerned, in the Roman atmosphere, in its lights and shades, and particularly in its reflected or secondary lights, something resembling

the atmosphere of his native promontory. Perhaps it was that in each case the eye was mostly resting on stone--that the quarries of ruins in the Eternal City reminded him of the quarries of maiden rock at home.

This being in his mind when he sat down to dinner at the common table, he was surprised to hear an American gentleman, who sat opposite, mention the name of Pierston's birthplace. The American was talking to a friend about a lady--an English widow, whose acquaintance they had renewed somewhere in the Channel Islands during a recent tour, after having known her as a young woman who came to San Francisco with her father and mother many years before. Her father was then a rich man just retired from the business of a stone-merchant in the Isle of Slingers; but he had engaged in large speculations, and had lost nearly all his fortune. Jocelyn further gathered that the widowed daughter's name was Mrs. Leverre; that she had a step-son, her husband having been a Jersey gentleman, a widower; and that the step-son seemed to be a promising and interesting young man.

Pierston was instantly struck with the perception that these and other allusions, though general, were in accord with the history of his long-lost Marcia. He hardly felt any desire to hunt her up after nearly two score years of separation, but he was impressed enough to resolve to exchange a word with the strangers as soon as he could get opportunity.

He could not well attract their attention through the plants upon the wide table, and even if he had been able he was disinclined to ask questions in public. He waited on till dinner was over, and when the strangers withdrew Pierston withdrew in their rear.

They were not in the drawing-room, and he found that they had gone out. There was no chance of overtaking them, but Pierston, waked to restlessness by their remarks, wandered up and down the adjoining Piazza di Spagna, thinking they might return. The streets below were immersed in shade, the front of the church of the Trinita de' Monti at the top was flooded with orange light, the gloom of evening gradually intensifying upon the broad, long flight of steps, which foot-passengers incessantly ascended and descended with the insignificance of ants; the dusk wrapped up the house to the left, in which Shelley had lived, and that to the right, in which Keats had died.

Getting back to the hotel he learnt that the Americans had only dropped in to dine, and were staying elsewhere. He saw no more of them; and on reflection he was not deeply concerned, for what earthly woman, going off in a freak as Marcia had done, and keeping silence so long, would care for a belated friendship with him now in the sere, even if he were to take the trouble to discover her.

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Thus much Marcia. The other thread of his connection with the ancient Isle of Slingers was stirred by a letter he received from Avice a little after this date, in which she stated that her husband Ike had been killed in his own quarry by an accident within the past year; that she herself had been ill, and though well again, and left amply provided for, she would like to see him if he ever came that way.

As she had not communicated for several long years, her expressed wish to see him now was likely to be prompted by something more, something newer, than memories of him. Yet the manner of her writing precluded all suspicion that she was thinking of him as an old lover whose suit events had now made practicable. He told her he was sorry to hear that she had been ill, and that he would certainly take an early opportunity of going down to her home on his next visit to England.

He did more. Her request had revived thoughts of his old home and its associations, and instead of awaiting other reasons for a return he made her the operating one. About a week later he stood once again at the foot of the familiar steep whereon the houses at the entrance to the Isle were perched like grey pigeons on a roof-side.

At Top-o'-Hill--as the summit of the rock was mostly called--he stood looking at the busy doings in the quarries beyond, where the numerous black hoisting-cranes scattered over the central plateau had the appearance of a swarm of crane-flies resting there. He went a little further, made some general inquiries about the accident which had carried off Avice's husband in the previous year, and learnt that though now a widow, she had plenty of friends and sympathizers about her, which rendered any immediate attention to her on his part unnecessary. Considering, therefore, that there was no great reason why he should call on her so soon, and without warning, he turned back. Perhaps after all her request had been dictated by a momentary feeling only, and a considerable strangeness to each other must naturally be the result of a score of dividing years. Descending to the bottom he took his seat in the train on the shore, which soon carried him along the Bank, and round to the watering-place five miles off, at which he had taken up his quarters for a few days.

Here, as he stayed on, his local interests revived. Whenever he went out he could see the island that was once his home lying like a great snail upon the sea across the bay. It was the spring of the year; local steamers had begun to run, and he was never tired of standing on the thinly occupied deck of one of these as it skirted the island and revealed to him on the cliffs far up its height the ruins of Red-King Castle, behind which the little village of East Quarriers lay.

Thus matters went on, if they did not rather stand still, for several days before Pierston redeemed his vague promise to seek Avice out. And in the meantime he was surprised by the arrival of another letter from her by a roundabout route. She had heard, she said, that he had been on the island, and imagined him therefore to be staying somewhere near. Why did he not call as he had told her he would do? She was always thinking of him, and wishing to see him.

Her tone was anxious, and there was no doubt that she really had something to say which she did not want to write. He wondered what it could be, and started the same afternoon.

Avice, who had been little in his mind of late years, began to renew for herself a distinct position therein. He was fully aware that since his earlier manhood a change had come over his regard of womankind. Once the individual had been nothing more to him than the temporary abiding-place of the typical or ideal; now his heart showed its bent to be a growing fidelity to the specimen, with all her pathetic flaws of detail; which flaws, so far from sending him further, increased his tenderness. This maturer feeling, if finer and higher, was less convenient than the old. Ardours of passion could be felt as in youth without the recuperative intervals which had accompanied evanescence.

The first sensation was to find that she had long ceased to live in the little freehold cottage she had occupied of old. In answer to his inquiries he was directed along the road to the west of the modern castle, past the entrance on that side, and onward to the very house that had once been his own home. There it stood as of yore, facing up the Channel, a comfortable roomy structure, the euonymus and other shrubs, which alone would stand in the teeth of the salt wind, living on at about the same stature in front of it; but the paint-work much renewed. A thriving man had resided there of late, evidently.

The widow in mourning who received him in the front parlour was, alas! but the sorry shadow of Avice the Second. How could he have fancied otherwise after twenty years? Yet he had been led to fancy otherwise, almost without knowing it, by feeling himself unaltered. Indeed, curiously enough, nearly the first words she said to him were: 'Why--you are just the same!'

'Just the same. Yes, I am, Avice,' he answered sadly; for this inability to ossify with the rest of his generation threw him out of proportion with the time. Moreover, while wearing the aspect of comedy, it was of the nature of tragedy.

'It is well to be you, sir,' she went on. 'I have had troubles to take

the bloom off me!

'Yes; I have been sorry for you.'

She continued to regard him curiously, with humorous interest; and he knew what was passing in her mind: that this man, to whom she had formerly looked up as to a person far in advance of her along the lane of life, seemed now to be a well-adjusted contemporary, the pair of them observing the world with fairly level eyes.

He had come to her with warmth for a vision which, on reaching her, he found to have departed; and, though fairly weaned by the natural reality, he was so far staunch as to linger hankeringly. They talked of past days, his old attachment, which she had then despised, being now far more absorbing and present to her than to himself.

She unmistakably won upon him as he sat on. A curious closeness between them had been produced in his imagination by the discovery that she was passing her life within the house of his own childhood. Her similar surname meant little here; but it was also his, and, added to the identity of domicile, lent a strong suggestiveness to the accident.

'This is where I used to sit when my parents occupied the house,' he said, placing himself beside that corner of the fireplace which commanded a view through the window. 'I could see a bough of tamarisk wave outside at that time, and, beyond the bough, the same abrupt grassy waste towards the sea, and at night the same old lightship blinking far out there. Place yourself on the spot, to please me.'

She set her chair where he indicated, and Pierston stood close beside her, directing her gaze to the familiar objects he had regarded thence as a boy. Her head and face--the latter thoughtful and worn enough, poor thing, to suggest a married life none too comfortable--were close to his breast, and, with a few inches further incline, would have touched it.

'And now you are the inhabitant; I the visitor,' he said. 'I am glad to see you here--so glad, Avice! You are fairly well provided for--I think I may assume that?' He looked round the room at the solid mahogany furniture, and at the modern piano and show bookcase.

'Yes, Ike left me comfortable. 'Twas he who thought of moving from my cottage to this larger house. He bought it, and I can live here as long as I choose to.'

Apart from the decline of his adoration to friendship, there seemed to be a general convergence of positions which suggested that he might make amends for the desertion of Avice the First by proposing to this Avice when a meet time should arrive. If he did not love her as he had done

when she was a slim thing catching mice in his rooms in London, he could surely be content at his age with comradeship. After all she was only forty to his sixty. The feeling that he really could be thus content was so convincing that he almost believed the luxury of getting old and reposeful was coming to his restless, wandering heart at last.

'Well, you have come at last, sir,' she went on; 'and I am grateful to you. I did not like writing, and yet I wanted to be straightforward. Have you guessed at all why I wished to see you so much that I could not help sending twice to you?'

'I have tried, but cannot.'

'Try again. It is a pretty reason, which I hope you'll forgive.'

'I am sure I sha'n't unriddle it. But I'll say this on my own account before you tell me. I have always taken a lingering interest in you, which you must value for what it is worth. It originated, so far as it concerns you personally, with the sight of you in that cottage round the corner, nineteen or twenty years ago, when I became tenant of the castle opposite. But that was not the very beginning. The very beginning was a score of years before that, when I, a young fellow of one-and-twenty, coming home here, from London, to see my father, encountered a tender woman as like you as your double; was much attracted by her as I saw her day after day flit past this window; till I made it my business to accompany her in her walks awhile. I, as you know, was not a staunch fellow, and it all ended badly. But, at any rate you, her daughter, and I are friends.'

'Ah! there she is!' suddenly exclaimed Avice, whose attention had wandered somewhat from his retrospective discourse. She was looking from the window towards the cliffs, where, upon the open ground quite near at hand, a slender female form was seen rambling along. 'She is out for a walk,' Avice continued. 'I wonder if she is going to call here this afternoon? She is living at the castle opposite as governess.'

'O, she's--'

'Yes. Her education was very thorough--better even than her grandmother's. I was the neglected one, and her father and myself both vowed that there should be no complaint on that score about her. We christened her Avice, to keep up the name, as you requested. I wish you could speak to her--I am sure you would like her.'

'Is that the baby?' faltered Jocelyn.

'Yes, the baby.'

The person signified, now much nearer, was a still more modernized, up-to-date edition of the two Avices of that blood with whom he had been involved more or less for the last forty years. A ladylike creature was she--almost elegant. She was altogether finer in figure than her mother or grandmother had ever been, which made her more of a woman in appearance than in years. She wore a large-disked sun-hat, with a brim like a wheel whose spokes were radiating folds of muslin lining the brim, a black margin beyond the muslin being the felloe. Beneath this brim her hair was massed low upon her brow, the colour of the thick tresses being probably, from her complexion, repeated in the irises of her large, deep eyes. Her rather nervous lips were thin and closed, so that they only appeared as a delicate red line. A changeable temperament was shown by that mouth--quick transitions from affection to aversion, from a pout to a smile.

It was Avice the Third.

Jocelyn and the second Avice continued to gaze ardently at her.

'Ah! she is not coming in now; she hasn't time,' murmured the mother, with some disappointment. 'Perhaps she means to run across in the evening.'

The tall girl, in fact, went past and on till she was out of sight. Pierston stood as in a dream. It was the very she, in all essential particulars, and with an intensification of general charm, who had kissed him forty years before. When he turned his head from the window his eyes fell again upon the intermediate Avice at his side. Before but the relic of the Well-Beloved, she had now become its empty shrine. Warm friendship, indeed, he felt for her; but whatever that might have done towards the instauration of a former dream was now hopelessly barred by the rivalry of the thing itself in the guise of a lineal successor.