

3. II. MISGIVINGS ON THE RE-EMBODIMENT

Pierston had been about to leave, but he sat down again on being asked if he would stay and have a cup of tea. He hardly knew for a moment what he did; a dim thought that Avice--the renewed Avice--might come into the house made his reseating himself an act of spontaneity.

He forgot that twenty years earlier he had called the now Mrs. Pierston an elf, a witch; and that lapse of time had probably not diminished the subtleties implied by those epithets. He did not know that she had noted every impression that her daughter had made upon him.

How he contrived to attenuate and disperse the rather tender personalities he had opened up with the new Avice's mother, Pierston never exactly defined. Perhaps she saw more than he thought she saw--read something in his face--knew that about his nature which he gave her no credit for knowing. Anyhow, the conversation took the form of a friendly gossip from that minute, his remarks being often given while his mind was turned elsewhere.

But a chill passed through Jocelyn when there had been time for reflection. The renewed study of his art in Rome without any counterbalancing practical pursuit had nourished and developed his natural responsiveness to impressions; he now felt that his old trouble, his doom--his curse, indeed, he had sometimes called it--was come back again. His divinity was not yet propitiated for that original sin against her image in the person of Avice the First, and now, at the age of one-and-sixty, he was urged on and on like the Jew Ahasuerus--or, in the phrase of the islanders themselves, like a blind ram.

The Goddess, an abstraction to the general, was a fairly real personage to Pierston. He had watched the marble images of her which stood in his working-room, under all changes of light and shade in the brightening of morning, in the blackening of eve, in moonlight, in lamplight. Every line and curve of her body none, naturally, knew better than he; and, though not a belief, it was, as has been stated, a formula, a superstition, that the three Avices were inter-penetrated with her essence.

'And the next Avice--your daughter,' he said stumblingly; 'she is, you say, a governess at the castle opposite?'

Mrs. Pierston reaffirmed the fact, adding that the girl often slept at home because she, her mother, was so lonely. She often thought she would like to keep her daughter at home altogether.

'She plays that instrument, I suppose?' said Pierston, regarding the piano.

'Yes, she plays beautifully; she had the best instruction that masters could give her. She was educated at Sandbourne.'

'Which room does she call hers when at home?' he asked curiously.

'The little one over this.'

It had been his own. 'Strange,' he murmured.

He finished tea, and sat after tea, but the youthful Avice did not arrive. With the Avice present he conversed as the old friend--no more. At last it grew dusk, and Pierston could not find an excuse for staying longer.

'I hope to make the acquaintance--of your daughter,' he said in leaving, knowing that he might have added with predestinate truth, 'of my new tenderly-beloved.'

'I hope you will,' she answered. 'This evening she evidently has gone for a walk instead of coming here.'

'And, by-the-bye, you have not told me what you especially wanted to see me for?'

'Ah, no. I will put it off.'

'Very well. I don't pretend to guess.'

'I must tell you another time.'

'If it is any little business in connection with your late husband's affairs, do command me. I'll do anything I can.'

'Thank you. And I shall see you again soon?'

'Certainly. Quite soon.'

When he was gone she looked reflectively at the spot where he had been standing, and said: 'Best hold my tongue. It will work of itself, without my telling.'

Jocelyn went from the house, but as the white road passed under his feet he felt in no mood to get back to his lodgings in the town on the mainland. He lingered about upon the rugged ground for a long while, thinking of the extraordinary reproduction of the original girl in this new form he had seen, and of himself as of a foolish dreamer in being so suddenly fascinated by the renewed image in a personality not one-third

of his age. As a physical fact, no doubt, the preservation of the likeness was no uncommon thing here, but it helped the dream.

Passing round the walls of the new castle he deviated from his homeward track by turning down the familiar little lane which led to the ruined castle of the Red King. It took him past the cottage in which the new Avice was born, from whose precincts he had heard her first infantine cry. Pausing he saw near the west behind him the new moon growing distinct upon the glow.

He was subject to gigantic fantasies still. In spite of himself, the sight of the new moon, as representing one who, by her so-called inconstancy, acted up to his own idea of a migratory Well-Beloved, made him feel as if his wraith in a changed sex had suddenly looked over the horizon at him. In a crowd secretly, or in solitude boldly, he had often bowed the knee three times to this sisterly divinity on her first appearance monthly, and directed a kiss towards her shining shape. The curse of his qualities (if it were not a blessing) was far from having spent itself yet.

In the other direction the castle ruins rose square and dusky against the sea. He went on towards these, around which he had played as a boy, and stood by the walls at the edge of the cliff pondering. There was no wind and but little tide, and he thought he could hear from years ago a voice that he knew. It certainly was a voice, but it came from the rocks beneath the castle ruin.

'Mrs. Atway!'

A silence followed, and nobody came. The voice spoke again; 'John Stoney!'

Neither was this summons attended to. The cry continued, with more entreaty: 'William Scribbsen!'

The voice was that of a Pierston--there could be no doubt of it--young Avice's, surely? Something or other seemed to be detaining her down there against her will. A sloping path beneath the beetling cliff and the castle walls rising sheer from its summit, led down to the lower level whence the voice proceeded. Pierston followed the pathway, and soon beheld a girl in light clothing--the same he had seen through the window--standing upon one of the rocks, apparently unable to move. Pierston hastened across to her.

'O, thank you for coming!' she murmured with some timidity. 'I have met with an awkward mishap. I live near here, and am not frightened really. My foot has become jammed in a crevice of the rock, and I cannot get it out, try how I will. What SHALL I do!'

Jocelyn stooped and examined the cause of discomfiture. 'I think if you can take your boot off,' he said, 'your foot might slip out, leaving the boot behind.'

She tried to act upon this advice, but could not do so effectually. Pierston then experimented by slipping his hand into the crevice till he could just reach the buttons of her boot, which, however, he could not unfasten any more than she. Taking his penknife from his pocket he tried again, and cut off the buttons one by one. The boot unfastened, and out slipped the foot.

'O, how glad I am!' she cried joyfully. 'I was fearing I should have to stay here all night. How can I thank you enough?'

He was tugging to withdraw the boot, but no skill that he could exercise would move it without tearing. At last she said: 'Don't try any longer. It is not far to the house. I can walk in my stocking.'

'I'll assist you in,' he said.

She said she did not want help, nevertheless allowed him to help her on the unshod side. As they moved on she explained that she had come out through the garden door; had been standing on the boulders to look at something out at sea just discernible in the evening light as assisted by the moon, and, in jumping down, had wedged her foot as he had found it.

Whatever Pierston's years might have made him look by day, in the dusk of evening he was fairly presentable as a pleasing man of no marked antiquity, his outline differing but little from what it had been when he was half his years. He was well preserved, still upright, trimly shaven, agile in movement; wore a tightly buttoned suit which set off a naturally slight figure; in brief, he might have been of any age as he appeared to her at this moment. She talked to him with the co-equality of one who assumed him to be not far ahead of her own generation; and, as the growing darkness obscured him more and more, he adopted her assumption of his age with increasing boldness of tone.

The flippant, harmless freedom of the watering-place Miss, which Avice had plainly acquired during her sojourn at the Sandbourne school, helped Pierston greatly in this role of jeune premier which he was not unready to play. Not a word did he say about being a native of the island; still more carefully did he conceal the fact of his having courted her grandmother, and engaged himself to marry that attractive lady.

He found that she had come out upon the rocks through the same little private door from the lawn of the modern castle which had frequently

afforded him egress to the same spot in years long past. Pierston accompanied her across the grounds almost to the entrance of the mansion--the place being now far better kept and planted than when he had rented it as a lonely tenant; almost, indeed, restored to the order and neatness which had characterized it when he was a boy.

Like her granny she was too inexperienced to be reserved, and during this little climb, leaning upon his arm, there was time for a great deal of confidence. When he had bidden her farewell, and she had entered, leaving him in the dark, a rush of sadness through Pierston's soul swept down all the temporary pleasure he had found in the charming girl's company. Had Mephistopheles sprung from the ground there and then with an offer to Jocelyn of restoration to youth on the usual terms of his firm, the sculptor might have consented to sell a part of himself which he felt less immediate need of than of a ruddy lip and cheek and an unploughed brow.

But what could only have been treated as a folly by outsiders was almost a sorrow for him. Why was he born with such a temperament? And this concatenated interest could hardly have arisen, even with Pierston, but for a conflux of circumstances only possible here. The three Avices, the second something like the first, the third a glorification of the first, at all events externally, were the outcome of the immemorial island customs of intermarriage and of prenuptial union, under which conditions the type of feature was almost uniform from parent to child through generations: so that, till quite latterly, to have seen one native man and woman was to have seen the whole population of that isolated rock, so nearly cut off from the mainland. His own predisposition and the sense of his early faithlessness did all the rest.

He turned gloomily away, and let himself out of the precincts. Before walking along the couple of miles of road which would conduct him to the little station on the shore, he redescended to the rocks whereon he had found her, and searched about for the fissure which had made a prisoner of this terribly belated edition of the Beloved. Kneeling down beside the spot he inserted his hand, and ultimately, by much wriggling, withdrew the pretty boot. He mused over it for a moment, put it in his pocket, and followed the stony route to the Street of Wells.