

3. III. THE RENEWED IMAGE BURNS ITSELF IN

There was nothing to hinder Pierston in calling upon the new Avice's mother as often as he should choose, beyond the five miles of intervening railway and additional mile or two of clambering over the heights of the island. Two days later, therefore, he repeated his journey and knocked about tea-time at the widow's door.

As he had feared, the daughter was not at home. He sat down beside the old sweetheart who, having eclipsed her mother in past days, had now eclipsed herself in her child. Jocelyn produced the girl's boot from his pocket.

'Then, 'tis YOU who helped Avice out of her predicament?' said Mrs. Pierston, with surprise.

'Yes, my dear friend; and perhaps I shall ask you to help me out of mine before I have done. But never mind that now. What did she tell you about the adventure?'

Mrs. Pierston was looking thoughtfully upon him. 'Well, 'tis rather strange it should have been you, sir,' she replied. She seemed to be a good deal interested. 'I thought it might have been a younger man--a much younger man.'

'It might have been as far as feelings were concerned.... Now, Avice, I'll to the point at once. Virtually I have known your daughter any number of years. When I talk to her I can anticipate every turn of her thought, every sentiment, every act, so long did I study those things in your mother and in you. Therefore I do not require to learn her; she was learnt by me in her previous existences. Now, don't be shocked: I am willing to marry her--I should be overjoyed to do it, if there would be nothing preposterous about it, or that would seem like a man making himself too much of a fool, and so degrading her in consenting. I can make her comparatively rich, as you know, and I would indulge her every whim. There is the idea, bluntly put. It would set right something in my mind that has been wrong for forty years. After my death she would have plenty of freedom and plenty of means to enjoy it.'

Mrs. Isaac Pierston seemed only a little surprised; certainly not shocked.

'Well, if I didn't think you might be a bit taken with her!' she said with an arch simplicity which could hardly be called unaffected. 'Knowing the set of your mind, from my little time with you years ago, nothing you could do in this way would astonish me.'

'But you don't think badly of me for it?'

'Not at all.... By-the-bye, did you ever guess why I asked you to come?... But never mind it now: the matter is past.... Of course, it would depend upon what Avice felt.... Perhaps she would rather marry a younger man.'

'And suppose a satisfactory younger man should not appear?'

Mrs. Pierston showed in her face that she fully recognized the difference between a rich bird in hand and a young bird in the bush. She looked him curiously up and down.

'I know you would make anybody a very nice husband,' she said. 'I know that you would be nicer than many men half your age; and, though there is a great deal of difference between you and her, there have been more unequal marriages, that's true. Speaking as her mother, I can say that I shouldn't object to you, sir, for her, provided she liked you. That is where the difficulty will lie.'

'I wish you would help me to get over that difficulty,' he said gently. 'Remember, I brought back a truant husband to you twenty years ago.'

'Yes, you did,' she assented; 'and, though I may say no great things as to happiness came of it, I've always seen that your intentions towards me were none the less noble on that account. I would do for you what I would do for no other man, and there is one reason in particular which inclines me to help you with Avice--that I should feel absolutely certain I was helping her to a kind husband.'

'Well, that would remain to be seen. I would, at any rate, try to be worthy of your opinion. Come, Avice, for old times' sake, you must help me. You never felt anything but friendship in those days, you know, and that makes it easy and proper for you to do me a good turn now.'

After a little more conversation his old friend promised that she really would do everything that lay in her power. She did not say how simple she thought him not to perceive that she had already, by writing to him, been doing everything that lay in her power; had created the feeling which prompted his entreaty. And to show her good faith in this promise she asked him to wait till later in the evening, when Avice might possibly run across to see her.

Pierston, who fancied he had won the younger Avice's interest, at least, by the part he had played upon the rocks the week before, had a dread of encountering her in full light till he should have advanced a little further in her regard. He accordingly was perplexed at this proposal, and, seeing his hesitation, Mrs. Pierston suggested that they should walk together in the direction whence Avice would come, if she came at

all.

He welcomed the idea, and in a few minutes they started, strolling along under the now strong moonlight, and when they reached the gates of Sylvania Castle turning back again towards the house. After two or three such walks up and down the gate of the castle grounds clicked, and a form came forth which proved to be the expected one.

As soon as they met the girl recognized in her mother's companion the gentleman who had helped her on the shore; and she seemed really glad to find that her chivalrous assistant was claimed by her parent as an old friend. She remembered hearing at divers times about this worthy London man of talent and position, whose ancestry were people of her own isle, and possibly, from the name, of a common stock with her own.

'And you have actually lived in Sylvania Castle yourself, Mr. Pierston?' asked Avice the daughter, with her innocent young voice. 'Was it long ago?'

'Yes, it was some time ago,' replied the sculptor, with a sinking at his heart lest she should ask how long.

'It must have been when I was away--or when I was very little?'

'I don't think you were away.'

'But I don't think I could have been here?'

'No, perhaps you couldn't have been here.'

'I think she was hiding herself in the parsley-bed,' said Avice's mother blandly.

They talked in this general way till they reached Mrs. Pierston's house; but Jocelyn resisted both the widow's invitation and the desire of his own heart, and went away without entering. To risk, by visibly confronting her, the advantage that he had already gained, or fancied he had gained, with the re-incarnate Avice required more courage than he could claim in his present mood.

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Such evening promenades as these were frequent during the waxing of that summer moon. On one occasion, as they were all good walkers, it was arranged that they should meet halfway between the island and the town in which Pierston had lodgings. It was impossible that by this time the

pretty young governess should not have guessed the ultimate reason of these rambles to be a matrimonial intention; but she inclined to the belief that the widow rather than herself was the object of Pierston's regard; though why this educated and apparently wealthy man should be attracted by her mother--whose homeliness was apparent enough to the girl's more modern training--she could not comprehend.

They met accordingly in the middle of the Pebble-bank, Pierston coming from the mainland, and the women from the peninsular rock. Crossing the wooden bridge which connected the bank with the shore proper they moved in the direction of Henry the Eighth's Castle, on the verge of the rag-stone cliff. Like the Red King's Castle on the island, the interior was open to the sky, and when they entered and the full moon streamed down upon them over the edge of the enclosing masonry, the whole present reality faded from Jocelyn's mind under the press of memories. Neither of his companions guessed what Pierston was thinking of. It was in this very spot that he was to have met the grandmother of the girl at his side, and in which he would have met her had she chosen to keep the appointment, a meeting which might--nay, must--have changed the whole current of his life.

Instead of that, forty years had passed--forty years of severance from Avice, till a secondly renewed copy of his sweetheart had arisen to fill her place. But he, alas, was not renewed. And of all this the pretty young thing at his side knew nothing.

Taking advantage of the younger woman's retreat to view the sea through an opening of the walls, Pierston appealed to her mother in a whisper: 'Have you ever given her a hint of what my meaning is? No? Then I think you might, if you really have no objection.'

Mrs. Pierston, as the widow, was far from being so coldly disposed in her own person towards her friend as in the days when he wanted to marry her. Had she now been the object of his wishes he would not have needed to ask her twice. But like a good mother she stifled all this, and said she would sound Avice there and then.

'Avice, my dear,' she said, advancing to where the girl mused in the window-gap, 'what do you think of Mr. Pierston paying his addresses to you--coming courting, as I call it in my old-fashioned way. Supposing he were to, would you encourage him?'

'To ME, mother?' said Avice, with an inquiring laugh. 'I thought--he meant you!'

'O no, he doesn't mean me,' said her mother hastily. 'He is nothing more than my friend.'

'I don't want any addresses,' said the daughter.

'He is a man in society, and would take you to an elegant house in London suited to your education, instead of leaving you to mope here.'

'I should like that well enough,' replied Avice carelessly.

'Then give him some encouragement.'

'I don't care enough about him to do any encouraging. It is his business, I should think, to do all.'

She spoke in her lightest vein; but the result was that when Pierston, who had discreetly withdrawn, returned to them, she walked docilely, though perhaps gloomily, beside him, her mother dropping to the rear. They came to a rugged descent, and Pierston took her hand to help her. She allowed him to retain it when they arrived on level ground.

Altogether it was not an unsuccessful evening for the man with the unanchored heart, though possibly initial success meant worse for him in the long run than initial failure. There was nothing marvellous in the fact of her tractability thus far. In his modern dress and style, under the rays of the moon, he looked a very presentable gentleman indeed, while his knowledge of art and his travelled manners were not without their attractions for a girl who with one hand touched the educated middle-class and with the other the rude and simple inhabitants of the isle. Her intensely modern sympathies were quickened by her peculiar outlook.

Pierston would have regarded his interest in her as overmuch selfish if there had not existed a redeeming quality in the substratum of old pathetic memory by which such love had been created--which still permeated it, rendering it the tenderest, most anxious, most protective instinct he had ever known. It may have had in its composition too much of the boyish fervour that had characterized such affection when he was cherry-cheeked, and light in the foot as a girl; but, if it was all this feeling of youth, it was more.

Mrs. Pierston, in fearing to be frank, lest she might seem to be angling for his fortune, did not fully divine his cheerful readiness to offer it, if by so doing he could make amends for his infidelity to her family forty years back in the past. Time had not made him mercenary, and it had quenched his ambitions; and though his wish to wed Avice was not entirely a wish to enrich her, the knowledge that she would be enriched beyond anything that she could have anticipated was what allowed him to indulge his love.

He was not exactly old he said to himself the next morning as he beheld

his face in the glass. And he looked considerably younger than he was. But there was history in his face--distinct chapters of it; his brow was not that blank page it once had been. He knew the origin of that line in his forehead; it had been traced in the course of a month or two by past troubles. He remembered the coming of this pale wiry hair; it had been brought by the illness in Rome, when he had wished each night that he might never wake again. This wrinkled corner, that drawn bit of skin, they had resulted from those months of despondency when all seemed going against his art, his strength, his happiness. 'You cannot live your life and keep it, Jocelyn,' he said. Time was against him and love, and time would probably win.

'When I went away from the first Avicé,' he continued with whimsical misery, 'I had a presentiment that I should ache for it some day. And I am aching--have ached ever since this jade of an Ideal learnt the unconscionable trick of inhabiting one image only.'

Upon the whole he was not without a bodement that it would be folly to press on.