3. IV. A DASH FOR THE LAST INCARNATION

This desultory courtship of a young girl which had been brought about by her mother's contrivance was interrupted by the appearance of Somers and his wife and family on the Budmouth Esplanade. Alfred Somers, once the youthful, picturesque as his own paintings, was now a middle-aged family man with spectacles--spectacles worn, too, with the single object of seeing through them--and a row of daughters tailing off to infancy, who at present added appreciably to the income of the bathing-machine women established along the sands.

Mrs. Somers--once the intellectual, emancipated Mrs. Pine-Avon--had now retrograded to the petty and timid mental position of her mother and grandmother, giving sharp, strict regard to the current literature and art that reached the innocent presence of her long perspective of girls, with the view of hiding every skull and skeleton of life from their dear eyes. She was another illustration of the rule that succeeding generations of women are seldom marked by cumulative progress, their advance as girls being lost in their recession as matrons; so that they move up and down the stream of intellectual development like flotsam in a tidal estuary. And this perhaps not by reason of their faults as individuals, but of their misfortune as child-rearers.

The landscape-painter, now an Academician like Pierston himself--rather popular than distinguished--had given up that peculiar and personal taste in subjects which had marked him in times past, executing instead many pleasing aspects of nature addressed to the furnishing householder through the middling critic, and really very good of their kind. In this way he received many large cheques from persons of wealth in England and America, out of which he built himself a sumptuous studio and an awkward house around it, and paid for the education of the growing maidens.

The vision of Somers's humble position as jackal to this lion of a family and house and studio and social reputation--Somers, to whom strange conceits and wild imaginings were departed joys never to return--led Pierston, as the painter's contemporary, to feel that he ought to be one of the bygones likewise, and to put on an air of unromantic bufferism. He refrained from entering Avice's peninsula for the whole fortnight of Somers's stay in the neighbouring town, although its grey poetical outline--'throned along the sea'--greeted his eyes every morn and eve across the roadstead.

When the painter and his family had gone back from their bathing holiday, he thought that he, too, would leave the neighbourhood. To do so, however, without wishing at least the elder Avice good-bye would be unfriendly, considering the extent of their acquaintance. One evening, knowing this time of day to suit her best, he took the few-minutes' journey to the rock along the thin connecting string of junction, and

arrived at Mrs. Pierston's door just after dark.

A light shone from an upper chamber. On asking for his widowed acquaintance he was informed that she was ill, seriously, though not dangerously. While learning that her daughter was with her, and further particulars, and doubting if he should go in, a message was sent down to ask him to enter. His voice had been heard, and Mrs. Pierston would like to see him.

He could not with any humanity refuse, but there flashed across his mind the recollection that Avice the youngest had never yet really seen him, had seen nothing more of him than an outline, which might have appertained as easily to a man thirty years his junior as to himself, and a countenance so renovated by faint moonlight as fairly to correspond. It was with misgiving, therefore, that the sculptor ascended the staircase and entered the little upper sitting-room, now arranged as a sick-chamber.

Mrs. Pierston reclined on a sofa, her face emaciated to a surprising thinness for the comparatively short interval since her attack. 'Come in, sir,' she said, as soon as she saw him, holding out her hand. 'Don't let me frighten you.'

Avice was seated beside her, reading. The girl jumped up, hardly seeming to recognize him. 'O! it's Mr. Pierston,' she said in a moment, adding quickly, with evident surprise and off her guard: 'I thought Mr. Pierston was--'

What she had thought he was did not pass her lips, and it remained a riddle for Jocelyn until a new departure in her manner towards him showed that the words 'much younger' would have accurately ended the sentence. Had Pierston not now confronted her anew, he might have endured philosophically her changed opinion of him. But he was seeing her again, and a rooted feeling was revived.

Pierston now learnt for the first time that the widow had been visited by sudden attacks of this sort not infrequently of late years. They were said to be due to angina pectoris, the latter paroxysms having been the most severe. She was at the present moment out of pain, though weak, exhausted, and nervous. She would not, however, converse about herself, but took advantage of her daughter's absence from the room to broach the subject most in her thoughts.

No compunctions had stirred her as they had her visitor on the expediency of his suit in view of his years. Her fever of anxiety lest after all he should not come to see Avice again had been not without an effect upon her health; and it made her more candid than she had intended to be.

'Troubles and sickness raise all sorts of fears, Mr. Pierston,' she said. 'What I felt only a wish for, when you first named it, I have hoped for a good deal since; and I have been so anxious that--that it should come to something! I am glad indeed that you are come.'

'My wanting to marry Avice, you mean, dear Mrs. Pierston?'

'Yes--that's it. I wonder if you are still in the same mind? You are? Then I wish something could be done--to make her agree to it--so as to get it settled. I dread otherwise what will become of her. She is not a practical girl as I was--she would hardly like now to settle down as an islander's wife; and to leave her living here alone would trouble me.'

'Nothing will happen to you yet, I hope, my dear old friend.'

'Well, it is a risky complaint; and the attacks, when they come, are so agonizing that to endure them I ought to get rid of all outside anxieties, folk say. Now--do you want her, sir?'

'With all my soul! But she doesn't want me.'

'I don't think she is so against you as you imagine. I fancy if it were put to her plainly, now I am in this state, it might be done.'

They lapsed into conversation on the early days of their acquaintance, until Mrs. Pierston's daughter re-entered the room.

'Avice,' said her mother, when the girl had been with them a few minutes. 'About this matter that I have talked over with you so many times since my attack. Here is Mr. Pierston, and he wishes to be your husband. He is much older than you; but, in spite of it, that you will ever get a better husband I don't believe. Now, will you take him, seeing the state I am in, and how naturally anxious I am to see you settled before I die?'

'But you won't die, mother! You are getting better!'

'Just for the present only. Come, he is a good man and a clever man, and a rich man. I want you, O so much, to be his wife! I can say no more.'

Avice looked appealingly at the sculptor, and then on the floor. 'Does he really wish me to?' she asked almost inaudibly, turning as she spoke to Pierston. 'He has never quite said so to me.'

'My dear one, how can you doubt it?' said Jocelyn quickly. 'But I won't press you to marry me as a favour, against your feelings.'

'I thought Mr. Pierston was younger!' she murmured to her mother.

'That counts for little, when you think how much there is on the other side. Think of our position, and of his--a sculptor, with a mansion, and a studio full of busts and statues that I have dusted in my time, and of the beautiful studies you would be able to take up. Surely the life would just suit you? Your expensive education is wasted down here!'

Avice did not care to argue. She was outwardly gentle as her grandmother had been, and it seemed just a question with her of whether she must or must not. 'Very well--I feel I ought to agree to marry him, since you tell me to,' she answered quietly, after some thought. 'I see that it would be a wise thing to do, and that you wish it, and that Mr. Pierston really does--like me. So--so that--'

Pierston was not backward at this critical juncture, despite unpleasant sensations. But it was the historic ingredient in this genealogical passion--if its continuity through three generations may be so described--which appealed to his perseverance at the expense of his wisdom. The mother was holding the daughter's hand; she took Pierston's, and laid Avice's in it.

No more was said in argument, and the thing was regarded as determined. Afterwards a noise was heard upon the window-panes, as of fine sand thrown; and, lifting the blind, Pierston saw that the distant lightship winked with a bleared and indistinct eye. A drizzling rain had come on with the dark, and it was striking the window in handfuls. He had intended to walk the two miles back to the station, but it meant a drenching to do it now. He waited and had supper; and, finding the weather no better, accepted Mrs. Pierston's invitation to stay over the night.

Thus it fell out that again he lodged in the house he had been accustomed to live in as a boy, before his father had made his fortune, and before his own name had been heard of outside the boundaries of the isle.

He slept but little, and in the first movement of the dawn sat up in bed. Why should he ever live in London or any other fashionable city if this plan of marriage could be carried out? Surely, with this young wife, the island would be the best place for him. It might be possible to rent Sylvania Castle as he had formerly done--better still to buy it. If life could offer him anything worth having it would be a home with Avice there on his native cliffs to the end of his days.

As he sat thus thinking, and the daylight increased, he discerned, a short distance before him, a movement of something ghostly. His position was facing the window, and he found that by chance the looking-glass

had swung itself vertical, so that what he saw was his own shape. The recognition startled him. The person he appeared was too grievously far, chronologically, in advance of the person he felt himself to be. Pierston did not care to regard the figure confronting him so mockingly. Its voice seemed to say 'There's tragedy hanging on to this!' But the question of age being pertinent he could not give the spectre up, and ultimately got out of bed under the weird fascination of the reflection. Whether he had overwalked himself lately, or what he had done, he knew not; but never had he seemed so aged by a score of years as he was represented in the glass in that cold grey morning light. While his soul was what it was, why should he have been encumbered with that withering carcase, without the ability to shift it off for another, as his ideal Beloved had so frequently done?

By reason of her mother's illness Avice was now living in the house, and, on going downstairs, he found that they were to breakfast en tete-a-tete. She was not then in the room, but she entered in the course of a few minutes. Pierston had already heard that the widow felt better this morning, and elated by the prospect of sitting with Avice at this meal he went forward to her joyously. As soon as she saw him in the full stroke of day from the window she started; and he then remembered that it was their first meeting under the solar rays.

She was so overcome that she turned and left the room as if she had forgotten something; when she re-entered she was visibly pale. She recovered herself, and apologized. She had been sitting up the night before the last, she said, and was not quite so well as usual.

There may have been some truth in this; but Pierston could not get over that first scared look of hers. It was enough to give daytime stability to his night views of a possible tragedy lurking in this wedding project. He determined that, at any cost to his heart, there should be no misapprehension about him from this moment.

'Miss Pierston,' he said as they sat down, 'since it is well you should know all the truth before we go any further, that there may be no awkward discoveries afterwards, I am going to tell you something about myself--if you are not too distressed to hear it?'

'No--let me hear it.'

'I was once the lover of your mother, and wanted to marry her, only she wouldn't, or rather couldn't, marry me.'

'O how strange!' said the girl, looking from him to the breakfast things, and from the breakfast things to him. 'Mother has never told me that. Yet of course, you might have been. I mean, you are old enough.'

He took the remark as a satire she had not intended. 'O yes--quite old enough,' he said grimly. 'Almost too old.'

'Too old for mother? How's that?'

'Because I belonged to your grandmother.'

'No? How can that be?'

'I was her lover likewise. I should have married her if I had gone straight on instead of round the corner.'

'But you couldn't have been, Mr. Pierston! You are not old enough? Why, how old are you?--you have never told me.'

'I am very old.'

'My mother's, and my grandmother's,' said she, looking at him no longer as at a possible husband, but as a strange fossilized relic in human form. Pierston saw it, but meaning to give up the game he did not care to spare himself.

'Your mother's and your grandmother's young man,' he repeated.

'And were you my great-grandmother's too?' she asked, with an expectant interest in his case as a drama that overcame her personal considerations for a moment.

'No--not your great-grandmother's. Your imagination beats even my confessions!... But I am VERY old, as you see.'

'I did not know it!' said she in an appalled murmur. 'You do not look so; and I thought that what you looked you were.'

'And you--you are very young,' he continued.

A stillness followed, during which she sat in a troubled constraint, regarding him now and then with something in her open eyes and large pupils that might have been sympathy or nervousness. Pierston ate scarce any breakfast, and rising abruptly from the table said he would take a walk on the cliffs as the morning was fine.

He did so, proceeding along the north-east heights for nearly a mile. He had virtually given Avice up, but not formally. His intention had been to go back to the house in half-an-hour and pay a morning visit to the invalid; but by not returning the plans of the previous evening might be allowed to lapse silently, as mere pourparlers that had come to nothing in the face of Avice's want of love for him. Pierston accordingly

went straight along, and in the course of an hour was at his Budmouth lodgings.

Nothing occurred till the evening to inform him how his absence had been taken. Then a note arrived from Mrs. Pierston; it was written in pencil, evidently as she lay.

'I am alarmed,' she said, 'at your going so suddenly. Avice seems to think she has offended you. She did not mean to do that, I am sure. It makes me dreadfully anxious! Will you send a line? Surely you will not desert us now--my heart is so set on my child's welfare!'

'Desert you I won't,' said Jocelyn. 'It is too much like the original case. But I must let her desert me!'

On his return, with no other object than that of wishing Mrs. Pierston good-bye, he found her painfully agitated. She clasped his hand and wetted it with her tears.

'O don't be offended with her!' she cried. 'She's young. We are one people--don't marry a kimberlin! It will break my heart if you forsake her now! Avice!'

The girl came. 'My manner was hasty and thoughtless this morning,' she said in a low voice. 'Please pardon me. I wish to abide by my promise.'

Her mother, still tearful, again joined their hands; and the engagement stood as before.

Pierston went back to Budmouth, but dimly seeing how curiously, through his being a rich suitor, ideas of beneficence and reparation were retaining him in the course arranged by her mother, and urged by his own desire in the face of his understanding.