

3. V. ON THE VERGE OF POSSESSION

In anticipation of his marriage Pierston had taken a new red house of the approved Kensington pattern, with a new studio at the back as large as a mediaeval barn. Hither, in collusion with the elder Avice--whose health had mended somewhat--he invited mother and daughter to spend a week or two with him, thinking thereby to exercise on the latter's imagination an influence which was not practicable while he was a guest at their house; and by interesting his betrothed in the fitting and furnishing of this residence to create in her an ambition to be its mistress.

It was a pleasant, reposeful time to be in town. There was nobody to interrupt them in their proceedings, and, it being out of the season, the largest tradesmen were as attentive to their wants as if those firms had never before been honoured with a single customer whom they really liked. Pierston and his guests, almost equally inexperienced--for the sculptor had nearly forgotten what knowledge of householding he had acquired earlier in life--could consider and practise thoroughly a species of skeleton-drill in receiving visitors when the pair should announce themselves as married and at home in the coming winter season.

Avice was charming, even if a little cold. He congratulated himself yet again that time should have reserved for him this final chance for one of the line. She was somewhat like her mother, whom he had loved in the flesh, but she had the soul of her grandmother, whom he had loved in the spirit--and, for that matter, loved now. Only one criticism had he to pass upon his choice: though in outward semblance her grandam idealized, she had not the first Avice's candour, but rather her mother's closeness. He never knew exactly what she was thinking and feeling. Yet he seemed to have such prescriptive rights in women of her blood that her occasional want of confidence did not deeply trouble him.

It was one of those ripe and mellow afternoons that sometimes colour London with their golden light at this time of the year, and produce those marvellous sunset effects which, if they were not known to be made up of kitchen coal-smoke and animal exhalations, would be rapturously applauded. Behind the perpendicular, oblique, zigzagged, and curved zinc 'tall-boys,' that formed a grey pattern not unlike early Gothic numerals against the sky, the men and women on the tops of the omnibuses saw an irradiation of topaz hues, darkened here and there into richest russet.

There had been a sharp shower during the afternoon, and Pierston--who had to take care of himself--had worn a pair of goloshes on his short walk in the street. He noiselessly entered the studio, inside which some gleams of the same mellow light had managed to creep, and where he guessed he should find his prospective wife and mother-in-law awaiting him with tea. But only Avice was there, seated beside the teapot of

brown delf, which, as artists, they affected, her back being toward him. She was holding her handkerchief to her eyes, and he saw that she was weeping silently.

In another moment he perceived that she was weeping over a book. By this time she had heard him, and came forward. He made it appear that he had not noticed her distress, and they discussed some arrangements of furniture. When he had taken a cup of tea she went away, leaving the book behind her.

Pierston took it up. The volume was an old school-book; Stievenard's 'Lectures Francaises,' with her name in it as a pupil at Sandbourne High School, and date-markings denoting lessons taken at a comparatively recent time, for Avice had been but a novice as governess when he discovered her.

For a school-girl--which she virtually was--to weep over a school-book was strange. Could she have been affected by some subject in the readings? Impossible. Pierston fell to thinking, and zest died for the process of furnishing, which he had undertaken so gaily. Somehow, the bloom was again disappearing from his approaching marriage. Yet he loved Avice more and more tenderly; he feared sometimes that in the solicitousness of his affection he was spoiling her by indulging her every whim.

He looked round the large and ambitious apartment, now becoming clouded with shades, out of which the white and cadaverous countenances of his studies, casts, and other lumber peered meditatively at him, as if they were saying, 'What are you going to do now, old boy?' They had never looked like that while standing in his past homely workshop, where all the real labours of his life had been carried out. What should a man of his age, who had not for years done anything to speak of--certainly not to add to his reputation as an artist--want with a new place like this? It was all because of the elect lady, and she apparently did not want him.

Pierston did not observe anything further in Avice to cause him misgiving till one dinner-time, a week later, towards the end of the visit. Then, as he sat himself between her and her mother at their limited table, he was struck with her nervousness, and was tempted to say, 'Why are you troubled, my little dearest?' in tones which disclosed that he was as troubled as she.

'Am I troubled?' she said with a start, turning her gentle hazel eyes upon him. 'Yes, I suppose I am. It is because I have received a letter--from an old friend.'

'You didn't show it to me,' said her mother.

'No--I tore it up.'

'Why?'

'It was not necessary to keep it, so I destroyed it.'

Mrs. Pierston did not press her further on the subject, and Avice showed no disposition to continue it. They retired rather early, as they always did, but Pierston remained pacing about his studio a long while, musing on many things, not the least being the perception that to wed a woman may be by no means the same thing as to be united with her. The 'old friend' of Avice's remark had sounded very much like 'lover.' Otherwise why should the letter have so greatly disturbed her?

There seemed to be something uncanny, after all, about London, in its relation to his contemplated marriage. When she had first come up she was easier with him than now. And yet his bringing her there had helped his cause; the house had decidedly impressed her--almost overawed her, and though he owned that by no law of nature or reason had her mother or himself any right to urge on Avice partnership with him against her inclination, he resolved to make the most of having her under his influence by getting the wedding details settled before she and her mother left.

The next morning he proceeded to do this. When he encountered Avice there was a trace of apprehension on her face; but he set that down to a fear that she had offended him the night before by her taciturnity. Directly he requested her mother, in Avice's presence, to get her to fix the day quite early, Mrs. Pierston became brighter and brisker. She, too, plainly had doubts about the wisdom of delay, and turning to her daughter said, 'Now, my dear, do you hear?'

It was ultimately agreed that the widow and her daughter should go back in a day or two, to await Pierston's arrival on the wedding-eve, immediately after their return.

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In pursuance of the arrangement Pierston found himself on the south shore of England in the gloom of the aforesaid evening, the isle, as he looked across at it with his approach, being just discernible as a moping countenance, a creature sullen with a sense that he was about to withdraw from its keeping the rarest object it had ever owned. He had come alone, not to embarrass them, and had intended to halt a couple of hours in the neighbouring seaport to give some orders relating to the

wedding, but the little railway train being in waiting to take him on, he proceeded with a natural impatience, resolving to do his business here by messenger from the isle.

He passed the ruins of the Tudor castle and the long featureless rib of grinding pebbles that screened off the outer sea, which could be heard lifting and dipping rhythmically in the wide vagueness of the Bay. At the under-hill island townlet of the Wells there were no flies, and leaving his things to be brought on, as he often did, he climbed the eminence on foot.

Half-way up the steepest part of the pass he saw in the dusk a figure pausing--the single person on the incline. Though it was too dark to identify faces, Pierston gathered from the way in which the halting stranger was supporting himself by the handrail, which here bordered the road to assist climbers, that the person was exhausted.

'Anything the matter?' he said.

'O no--not much,' was returned by the other. 'But it is steep just here.'

The accent was not quite that of an Englishman, and struck him as hailing from one of the Channel Islands. 'Can't I help you up to the top?' he said, for the voice, though that of a young man, seemed faint and shaken.

'No, thank you. I have been ill; but I thought I was all right again; and as the night was fine I walked into the island by the road. It turned out to be rather too much for me, as there is some weakness left still; and this stiff incline brought it out.'

'Naturally. You'd better take hold of my arm--at any rate to the brow here.'

Thus pressed the stranger did so, and they went on towards the ridge, till, reaching the lime-kiln standing there the stranger abandoned his hold, saying: 'Thank you for your assistance, sir. Good-night.'

'I don't think I recognize your voice as a native's?'

'No, it is not. I am a Jersey man. Goodnight, sir.'

'Good-night, if you are sure you can get on. Here, take this stick--it is no use to me.' Saying which, Pierston put his walking-stick into the young man's hand.

'Thank you again. I shall be quite recovered when I have rested a minute

or two. Don't let me detain you, please.'

The stranger as he spoke turned his face towards the south, where the Beal light had just come into view, and stood regarding it with an obstinate fixity. As he evidently wished to be left to himself Jocelyn went on, and troubled no more about him, though the desire of the young man to be rid of his company, after accepting his walking-stick and his arm, had come with a suddenness that was almost emotional; and impressionable as Jocelyn was, no less now than in youth, he was saddened for a minute by the sense that there were people in the world who did not like even his sympathy.

However, a pleasure which obliterated all this arose when Pierston drew near to the house that was likely to be his dear home on all future visits to the isle, perhaps even his permanent home as he grew older and the associations of his youth re-asserted themselves. It had been, too, his father's house, the house in which he was born, and he amused his fancy with plans for its enlargement under the supervision of Avice and himself. It was a still greater pleasure to behold a tall and shapely figure standing against the light of the open door and presumably awaiting him.

Avice, who it was, gave a little jump when she recognized him, but dutifully allowed him to kiss her when he reached her side; though her nervousness was only too apparent, and was like a child's towards a parent who may prove stern.

'How dear of you to guess that I might come on at once instead of later!' said Jocelyn. 'Well, if I had stayed in the town to go to the shops and so on, I could not have got here till the last train. How is mother?--our mother, as I shall call her soon.'

Avice said that her mother had not been so well--she feared not nearly so well since her return from London, so that she was obliged to keep her room. The visit had perhaps been too much for her. 'But she will not acknowledge that she is much weaker, because she will not disturb my happiness.'

Jocelyn was in a mood to let trifles of manner pass, and he took no notice of the effort which had accompanied the last word. They went upstairs to Mrs. Pierston, whose obvious relief and thankfulness at sight of him was grateful to her visitor.

'I am so, O so glad you are come!' she said huskily, as she held out her thin hand and stifled a sob. 'I have been so--'

She could get no further for a moment, and Avice turned away weeping, and abruptly left the room.

'I have so set my heart on this,' Mrs. Pierston went on, 'that I have not been able to sleep of late, for I have feared I might drop off suddenly before she is yours, and lose the comfort of seeing you actually united. Your being so kind to me in old times has made me so sure that she will find a good husband in you, that I am over anxious, I know. Indeed, I have not liked to let her know quite how anxious I am.'

Thus they talked till Jocelyn bade her goodnight, it being noticeable that Mrs. Pierston, chastened by her illnesses, maintained no longer any reserve on her gladness to acquire him as her son-in-law; and her feelings destroyed any remaining scruples he might have had from perceiving that Avice's consent was rather an obedience than a desire. As he went downstairs, and found Avice awaiting his descent, he wondered if anything had occurred here during his absence to give Mrs. Pierston new uneasiness about the marriage, but it was an inquiry he could not address to a girl whose actions could alone be the cause of such uneasiness.

He looked round for her as he supped, but though she had come into the room with him she was not there now. He remembered her telling him that she had had supper with her mother, and Jocelyn sat on quietly musing and sipping his wine for something near half-an-hour. Wondering then for the first time what had become of her, he rose and went to the door. Avice was quite near him after all--only standing at the front door as she had been doing when he came, looking into the light of the full moon, which had risen since his arrival. His sudden opening of the dining-room door seemed to agitate her.

'What is it, dear?' he asked.

'As mother is much better and doesn't want me, I ought to go and see somebody I promised to take a parcel to--I feel I ought. And yet, as you have just come to see me--I suppose you don't approve of my going out while you are here?'

'Who is the person?'

'Somebody down that way,' she said indefinitely. 'It is not very far off. I am not afraid--I go out often by myself at night hereabout.'

He reassured her good-humouredly. 'If you really wish to go, my dear, of course I don't object. I have no authority to do that till tomorrow, and you know that if I had it I shouldn't use it.'

'O but you have! Mother being an invalid, you are in her place, apart from--to-morrow.'

'Nonsense, darling. Run across to your friend's house by all means if you want to.'

'And you'll be here when I come in?'

'No, I am going down to the inn to see if my things are brought up.'

'But hasn't mother asked you to stay here? The spare room was got ready for you.... Dear me, I am afraid I ought to have told you.'

'She did ask me. But I have some things coming, directed to the inn, and I had better be there. So I'll wish you good-night, though it is not late. I will come in quite early to-morrow, to inquire how your mother is going on, and to wish you good-morning. You will be back again quickly this evening?'

'O yes.'

'And I needn't go with you for company?'

'O no, thank you. It is no distance.'

Pierston then departed, thinking how entirely her manner was that of one to whom a question of doing anything was a question of permission and not of judgment. He had no sooner gone than Avice took a parcel from a cupboard, put on her hat and cloak, and following by the way he had taken till she reached the entrance to Sylvania Castle, there stood still. She could hear Pierston's footsteps passing down East Quarriers to the inn; but she went no further in that direction. Turning into the lane on the right, of which mention has so often been made, she went quickly past the last cottage, and having entered the gorge beyond she clambered into the ruin of the Red King's or Bow-and-Arrow Castle, standing as a square black mass against the moonlit, indefinite sea.