

3. VII. AN OLD TABERNACLE IN A NEW ASPECT

The October day thickened into dusk, and Jocelyn sat musing beside the corpse of Mrs. Pierston. Avice having gone away nobody knew whither, he had acted as the nearest friend of the family, and attended as well as he could to the sombre duties necessitated by her mother's decease. It was doubtful, indeed, if anybody else were in a position to do so. Of Avice the Second's two brothers, one had been drowned at sea, and the other had emigrated, while her only child besides the present Avice had died in infancy. As for her friends, she had become so absorbed in her ambitious and nearly accomplished design of marrying her daughter to Jocelyn, that she had gradually completed that estrangement between herself and the other islanders which had been begun so long ago as when, a young woman, she had herself been asked by Pierston to marry him. On her tantalizing inability to accept the honour offered, she and her husband had been set up in a matter-of-fact business in the stone trade by her patron, but that unforgettable request in the London studio had made her feel ever since a refined kinship with sculpture, and a proportionate aloofness from mere quarrying, which was, perhaps, no more than a venial weakness in Avice the Second. Her daughter's objection to Jocelyn she could never understand. To her own eye he was no older than when he had proposed to her.

As he sat darkling here the ghostly outlines of former shapes taken by his Love came round their sister the unconscious corpse, confronting him from the wall in sad array, like the pictured Trojan women beheld by Aeneas on the walls of Carthage. Many of them he had idealized in bust and in figure from time to time, but it was not as such that he remembered and reanimated them now; rather was it in all their natural circumstances, weaknesses, and stains. And then as he came to himself their voices grew fainter; they had all gone off on their different careers, and he was left here alone.

The probable ridicule that would result to him from the events of the day he did not mind in itself at all. But he would fain have removed the misapprehensions on which it would be based. That, however, was impossible. Nobody would ever know the truth about him; what it was he had sought that had so eluded, tantalized, and escaped him; what it was that had led him such a dance, and had at last, as he believed just now in the freshness of his loss, been discovered in the girl who had left him. It was not the flesh; he had never knelt low to that. Not a woman in the world had been wrecked by him, though he had been impassioned by so many. Nobody would guess the further sentiment--the cordial loving-kindness--which had lain behind what had seemed to him the enraptured fulfilment of a pleasing destiny postponed for forty years. His attraction to the third Avice would be regarded by the world as the selfish designs of an elderly man on a maid.

His life seemed no longer a professional man's experience, but a ghost story; and he would fain have vanished from his haunts on this critical afternoon, as the rest had done. He desired to sleep away his tendencies, to make something happen which would put an end to his bondage to beauty in the ideal.

So he sat on till it was quite dark, and a light was brought. There was a chilly wind blowing outside, and the lightship on the quicksand afar looked harassed and forlorn. The haggard solitude was broken by a ring at the door.

Pierston heard a voice below, the accents of a woman. They had a ground quality of familiarity, a superficial articulation of strangeness. Only one person in all his experience had ever possessed precisely those tones; rich, as if they had once been powerful. Explanations seemed to be asked for and given, and in a minute he was informed that a lady was downstairs whom perhaps he would like to see.

'Who is the lady?' Jocelyn asked.

The servant hesitated a little. 'Mrs. Leverre--the mother of the--young gentleman Miss Avice has run off with.'

'Yes--I'll see her,' said Pierston.

He covered the face of the dead Avice, and descended. 'Leverre,' he said to himself. His ears had known that name before to-day. It was the name those travelling Americans he had met in Rome gave the woman he supposed might be Marcia Bencomb.

A sudden adjusting light burst upon many familiar things at that moment. He found the visitor in the drawing-room, standing up veiled, the carriage which had brought her being in waiting at the door. By the dim light he could see nothing of her features in such circumstances.

'Mr. Pierston?'

'I am Mr. Pierston.'

'You represent the late Mrs. Pierston?'

'I do--though I am not one of the family.'

'I know it.... I am Marcia--after forty years.'

'I was divining as much, Marcia. May the lines have fallen to you in pleasant places since we last met! But, of all moments of my life, why

do you choose to hunt me up now?'

'Why--I am the step-mother and only relation of the young man your bride eloped with this morning.'

'I was just guessing that, too, as I came downstairs. But--'

'And I am naturally making inquiries.'

'Yes. Let us take it quietly, and shut the door.'

Marcia sat down. And he learnt that the conjunction of old things and new was no accident. What Mrs. Pierston had discussed with her nurse and neighbour as vague intelligence, was now revealed to Jocelyn at first hand by Marcia herself; how, many years after their separation, and when she was left poor by the death of her impoverished father, she had become the wife of that bygone Jersey lover of hers, who wanted a tender nurse and mother for the infant left him by his first wife recently deceased; how he had died a few years later, leaving her with the boy, whom she had brought up at St. Heliers and in Paris, educating him as well as she could with her limited means, till he became the French master at a school in Sandbourne; and how, a year ago, she and her son had got to know Mrs. Pierston and her daughter on their visit to the island, 'to ascertain,' she added, more deliberately, 'not entirely for sentimental reasons, what had become of the man with whom I eloped in the first flush of my young womanhood, and only missed marrying by my own will.'

Pierston bowed.

'Well, that was how the acquaintance between the children began, and their passionate attachment to each other.' She detailed how Avice had induced her mother to let her take lessons in French of young Leverre, rendering their meetings easy. Marcia had never thought of hindering their intimacy, for in her recent years of affliction she had acquired a new interest in the name she had refused to take in her purse-proud young womanhood; and it was not until she knew how determined Mrs. Pierston was to make her daughter Jocelyn's wife that she had objected to her son's acquaintance with Avice. But it was too late to hinder what had been begun. He had lately been ill, and she had been frightened by his not returning home the night before. The note she had received from him that day had only informed her that Avice and himself had gone to be married immediately--whither she did not know.

'What do you mean to do?' she asked.

'I do nothing: there is nothing to be done.... It is how I served her grandmother--one of Time's revenges.'

'Served her so for me.'

'Yes. Now she me for your son.'

Marcia paused a long while thinking that over, till arousing herself she resumed: 'But can't we inquire which way they went out of the island, or gather some particulars about them?'

'Aye--yes. We will.'

And Pierston found himself as in a dream walking beside Marcia along the road in their common quest. He discovered that almost every one of the neighbouring inhabitants knew more about the lovers than he did himself.

At the corner some men were engaged in conversation on the occurrence. It was allusive only, but knowing the dialect, Pierston and Marcia gathered its import easily. As soon as it had got light that morning one of the boats was discovered missing from the creek below, and when the flight of the lovers was made known it was inferred that they were the culprits.

Unconsciously Pierston turned in the direction of the creek, without regarding whether Marcia followed him, and though it was darker than when Avice and Leverre had descended in the morning he pursued his way down the incline till he reached the water-side.

'Is that you, Jocelyn?'

The inquiry came from Marcia. She was behind him, about half-way down.

'Yes,' he said, noticing that it was the first time she had called him by his Christian name.

'I can't see where you are, and I am afraid to follow.'

Afraid to follow. How strangely that altered his conception of her. Till this moment she had stood in his mind as the imperious, invincible Marcia of old. There was a strange pathos in this revelation. He went back and felt for her hand. 'I'll lead you down,' he said. And he did so.

They looked out upon the sea, and the lightship shining as if it had quite forgotten all about the fugitives. 'I am so uneasy,' said Marcia. 'Do you think they got safely to land?'

'Yes,' replied some one other than Jocelyn. It was a boatman smoking in the shadow of the boathouse. He informed her that they were picked up by

the lightship men, and afterwards, at their request, taken across to the opposite shore, where they landed, proceeding thence on foot to the nearest railway station and entering the train for London. This intelligence had reached the island about an hour before.

'They'll be married to-morrow morning!' said Marcia.

'So much the better. Don't regret it, Marcia. He shall not lose by it. I have no relation in the world except some twentieth cousins in the isle, of whom her father was one, and I'll take steps at once to make her a good match for him. As for me... I have lived a day too long.'