

CHAPTER II. ROYAL OAK

The war had killed the little market of the town. As he passed the market place on the brow, Aaron noticed that there were only two miserable stalls. But people crowded just the same. There was a loud sound of voices, men's voices. Men pressed round the doorways of the public-houses.

But he was going to a pub out of town. He descended the dark hill. A street-lamp here and there shed parsimonious light. In the bottoms, under the trees, it was very dark. But a lamp glimmered in front of the "Royal Oak." This was a low white house sunk three steps below the highway. It was darkened, but sounded crowded.

Opening the door, Sisson found himself in the stone passage. Old Bob, carrying three cans, stopped to see who had entered--then went on into the public bar on the left. The bar itself was a sort of little window-sill on the right: the pub was a small one. In this window-opening stood the landlady, drawing and serving to her husband. Behind the bar was a tiny parlour or den, the landlady's preserve.

"Oh, it's you," she said, bobbing down to look at the newcomer. None entered her bar-parlour unless invited.

"Come in," said the landlady. There was a peculiar intonation in her

complacent voice, which showed she had been expecting him, a little irritably.

He went across into her bar-parlour. It would not hold more than eight or ten people, all told--just the benches along the walls, the fire between--and two little round tables.

"I began to think you weren't coming," said the landlady, bringing him a whiskey.

She was a large, stout, high-coloured woman, with a fine profile, probably Jewish. She had chestnut-coloured eyes, quick, intelligent. Her movements were large and slow, her voice laconic.

"I'm not so late, am I?" asked Aaron.

"Yes, you are late, I should think." She looked up at the little clock.

"Close on nine."

"I did some shopping," said Aaron, with a quick smile.

"Did you indeed? That's news, I'm sure. May we ask what you bought?"

This he did not like. But he had to answer.

"Christmas-tree candles, and toffee."

"For the little children? Well you've done well for once! I must say I recommend you. I didn't think you had so much in you."

She sat herself down in her seat at the end of the bench, and took up her knitting. Aaron sat next to her. He poured water into his glass, and drank.

"It's warm in here," he said, when he had swallowed the liquor.

"Yes, it is. You won't want to keep that thick good overcoat on," replied the landlady.

"No," he said, "I think I'll take it off."

She watched him as he hung up his overcoat. He wore black clothes, as usual. As he reached up to the pegs, she could see the muscles of his shoulders, and the form of his legs. Her reddish-brown eyes seemed to burn, and her nose, that had a subtle, beautiful Hebraic curve, seemed to arch itself. She made a little place for him by herself, as he returned. She carried her head thrown back, with dauntless self-sufficiency.

There were several colliers in the room, talking quietly. They were the superior type all, favoured by the landlady, who loved intellectual discussion. Opposite, by the fire, sat a little, greenish man--evidently

an oriental.

"You're very quiet all at once, Doctor," said the landlady in her slow, laconic voice.

"Yes.--May I have another whiskey, please?" She rose at once, powerfully energetic.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said. And she went to the bar.

"Well," said the little Hindu doctor, "and how are things going now, with the men?"

"The same as ever," said Aaron.

"Yes," said the stately voice of the landlady. "And I'm afraid they will always be the same as ever. When will they learn wisdom?"

"But what do you call wisdom?" asked Sherardy, the Hindu. He spoke with a little, childish lisp.

"What do I call wisdom?" repeated the landlady. "Why all acting together for the common good. That is wisdom in my idea."

"Yes, very well, that is so. But what do you call the common good?" replied the little doctor, with childish pertinence.

"Ay," said Aaron, with a laugh, "that's it." The miners were all stirring now, to take part in the discussion.

"What do I call the common good?" repeated the landlady. "That all people should study the welfare of other people, and not only their own."

"They are not to study their own welfare?" said the doctor.

"Ah, that I did not say," replied the landlady. "Let them study their own welfare, and that of others also."

"Well then," said the doctor, "what is the welfare of a collier?"

"The welfare of a collier," said the landlady, "is that he shall earn sufficient wages to keep himself and his family comfortable, to educate his children, and to educate himself; for that is what he wants, education."

"Ay, happen so," put in Brewitt, a big, fine, good-humoured collier.

"Happen so, Mrs. Houseley. But what if you haven't got much education, to speak of?"

"You can always get it," she said patronizing.

"Nay--I'm blest if you can. It's no use tryin' to educate a man over forty--not by book-learning. That isn't saying he's a fool, neither."

"And what better is them that's got education?" put in another man. "What better is the manager, or th' under-manager, than we are?--Pender's yaller enough i' th' face."

"He is that," assented the men in chorus.

"But because he's yellow in the face, as you say, Mr. Kirk," said the landlady largely, "that doesn't mean he has no advantages higher than what you have got."

"Ay," said Kirk. "He can ma'e more money than I can--that's about a' as it comes to."

"He can make more money," said the landlady. "And when he's made it, he knows better how to use it."

"'Appen so, an' a!--What does he do, more than eat and drink and work?--an' take it out of hisself a sight harder than I do, by th' looks of him.--What's it matter, if he eats a bit more or drinks a bit more--"

"No," reiterated the landlady. "He not only eats and drinks. He can read, and he can converse."

"Me an' a'," said Tom Kirk, and the men burst into a laugh. "I can read--an' I've had many a talk an' conversation with you in this house, Mrs. Houseley--am havin' one at this minute, seemingly."

"SEEMINGLY, you are," said the landlady ironically. "But do you think there would be no difference between your conversation, and Mr. Pender's, if he were here so that I could enjoy his conversation?"

"An' what difference would there be?" asked Tom Kirk. "He'd go home to his bed just the same."

"There, you are mistaken. He would be the better, and so should I, a great deal better, for a little genuine conversation."

"If it's conversation as ma'es his behind drop--" said Tom Kirk. "An' puts th' bile in his face--" said Brewitt. There was a general laugh.

"I can see it's no use talking about it any further," said the landlady, lifting her head dangerously.

"But look here, Mrs. Houseley, do you really think it makes much difference to a man, whether he can hold a serious conversation or not?" asked the doctor.

"I do indeed, all the difference in the world--To me, there is no greater difference, than between an educated man and an uneducated man."

"And where does it come in?" asked Kirk.

"But wait a bit, now," said Aaron Sisson. "You take an educated man--take Pender. What's his education for? What does he scheme for?--What does he contrive for? What does he talk for?--"

"For all the purposes of his life," replied the landlady.

"Ay, an' what's the purpose of his life?" insisted Aaron Sisson.

"The purpose of his life," repeated the landlady, at a loss. "I should think he knows that best himself."

"No better than I know it--and you know it," said Aaron.

"Well," said the landlady, "if you know, then speak out. What is it?"

"To make more money for the firm--and so make his own chance of a rise better."

The landlady was baffled for some moments. Then she said:

"Yes, and suppose that he does. Is there any harm in it? Isn't it his duty to do what he can for himself? Don't you try to earn all you can?"

"Ay," said Aaron. "But there's soon a limit to what I can earn.--It's like this. When you work it out, everything comes to money. Reckon it as you like, it's money on both sides. It's money we live for, and money is what our lives is worth--nothing else. Money we live for, and money we are when we're dead: that or nothing. An' it's money as is between the masters and us. There's a few educated ones got hold of one end of the rope, and all the lot of us hanging on to th' other end, an' we s'll go on pulling our guts out, time in, time out--"

"But they've got th' long end o' th' rope, th' masters has," said Brewitt.

"For as long as one holds, the other will pull," concluded Aaron Sisson philosophically.

"An' I'm almighty sure o' that," said Kirk. There was a little pause.

"Yes, that's all there is in the minds of you men," said the landlady.

"But what can be done with the money, that you never think of--the education of the children, the improvement of conditions--"

"Educate the children, so that they can lay hold of the long end of the rope, instead of the short end," said the doctor, with a little giggle.

"Ay, that's it," said Brewitt. "I've pulled at th' short end, an' my lads may do th' same."

"A selfish policy," put in the landlady.

"Selfish or not, they may do it."

"Till the crack o' doom," said Aaron, with a glistening smile.

"Or the crack o' th' rope," said Brewitt.

"Yes, and THEN WHAT?" cried the landlady.

"Then we all drop on our backsides," said Kirk. There was a general laugh, and an uneasy silence.

"All I can say of you men," said the landlady, "is that you have a narrow, selfish policy.--Instead of thinking of the children, instead of thinking of improving the world you live in--"

"We hang on, British bulldog breed," said Brewitt. There was a general laugh.

"Yes, and little wiser than dogs, wrangling for a bone," said the landlady.

"Are we to let t' other side run off wi' th' bone, then, while we sit on our stunts an' yowl for it?" asked Brewitt.

"No indeed. There can be wisdom in everything.--It's what you DO with the money, when you've got it," said the landlady, "that's where the importance lies."

"It's Missis as gets it," said Kirk. "It doesn't stop wi' us." "Ay, it's the wife as gets it, ninety per cent," they all concurred.

"And who SHOULD have the money, indeed, if not your wives? They have everything to do with the money. What idea have you, but to waste it!"

"Women waste nothing--they couldn't if they tried," said Aaron Sisson.

There was a lull for some minutes. The men were all stimulated by drink. The landlady kept them going. She herself sipped a glass of brandy--but slowly. She sat near to Sisson--and the great fierce warmth of her presence enveloped him particularly. He loved so to luxuriate, like a cat, in the presence of a violent woman. He knew that tonight she was feeling very nice to him--a female glow that came out of her to him. Sometimes when she put down her knitting, or took it up again from the bench beside him, her fingers just touched his thigh, and the fine electricity ran over his body, as if he were a cat tingling at a caress.

And yet he was not happy--nor comfortable. There was a hard, opposing core in him, that neither the whiskey nor the woman could dissolve or soothe, tonight. It remained hard, nay, became harder and more deeply

antagonistic to his surroundings, every moment. He recognised it as a secret malady he suffered from: this strained, unacknowledged opposition to his surroundings, a hard core of irrational, exhausting withholding of himself. Irritating, because he still WANTED to give himself. A woman and whiskey, these were usually a remedy--and music. But lately these had begun to fail him. No, there was something in him that would not give in--neither to the whiskey, nor the woman, nor even the music. Even in the midst of his best music, it sat in the middle of him, this invisible black dog, and growled and waited, never to be cajoled. He knew of its presence--and was a little uneasy. For of course he wanted to let himself go, to feel rosy and loving and all that. But at the very thought, the black dog showed its teeth.

Still he kept the beast at bay--with all his will he kept himself as it were genial. He wanted to melt and be rosy, happy.

He sipped his whiskey with gratification, he luxuriated in the presence of the landlady, very confident of the strength of her liking for him. He glanced at her profile--that fine throw-back of her hostile head, wicked in the midst of her benevolence; that subtle, really very beautiful delicate curve of her nose, that moved him exactly like a piece of pure sound. But tonight it did not overcome him. There was a devilish little cold eye in his brain that was not taken in by what he saw.

A terrible obstinacy located itself in him. He saw the fine,

rich-coloured, secretive face of the Hebrew woman, so loudly self-righteous, and so dangerous, so destructive, so lustful--and he waited for his blood to melt with passion for her. But not tonight. Tonight his innermost heart was hard and cold as ice. The very danger and lustfulness of her, which had so pricked his senses, now made him colder. He disliked her at her tricks. He saw her once too often. Her and all women. Bah, the love game! And the whiskey that was to help in the game! He had drowned himself once too often in whiskey and in love. Now he floated like a corpse in both, with a cold, hostile eye.

And at least half of his inward fume was anger because he could no longer drown. Nothing would have pleased him better than to feel his senses melting and swimming into oneness with the dark. But impossible! Cold, with a white fury inside him, he floated wide eyed and apart as a corpse. He thought of the gentle love of his first married years, and became only whiter and colder, set in more intense obstinacy. A wave of revulsion lifted him.

He became aware that he was deadly antagonistic to the landlady, that he disliked his whole circumstances. A cold, diabolical consciousness detached itself from his state of semi-intoxication.

"Is it pretty much the same out there in India?" he asked of the doctor, suddenly.

The doctor started, and attended to him on his own level.

"Probably," he answered. "It is worse."

"Worse!" exclaimed Aaron Sisson. "How's that?"

"Why, because, in a way the people of India have an easier time even than the people of England. Because they have no responsibility. The British Government takes the responsibility. And the people have nothing to do, except their bit of work--and talk perhaps about national rule, just for a pastime."

"They have to earn their living?" said Sisson.

"Yes," said the little doctor, who had lived for some years among the colliers, and become quite familiar with them. "Yes, they have to earn their living--and then no more. That's why the British Government is the worst thing possible for them. It is the worst thing possible. And not because it is a bad government. Really, it is not a bad government. It is a good one--and they know it--much better than they would make for themselves, probably. But for that reason it is so very bad."

The little oriental laughed a queer, sniggering laugh. His eyes were very bright, dilated, completely black. He was looking into the ice-blue, pointed eyes of Aaron Sisson. They were both intoxicated--but grimly so. They looked at each other in elemental difference.

The whole room was now attending to this new conversation: which they all accepted as serious. For Aaron was considered a special man, a man of peculiar understanding, even though as a rule he said little.

"If it is a good government, doctor, how can it be so bad for the people?" said the landlady.

The doctor's eyes quivered for the fraction of a second, as he watched the other man. He did not look at the landlady.

"It would not matter what kind of mess they made--and they would make a mess, if they governed themselves, the people of India. They would probably make the greatest muddle possible--and start killing one another. But it wouldn't matter if they exterminated half the population, so long as they did it themselves, and were responsible for it."

Again his eyes dilated, utterly black, to the eyes of the other man, and an arch little smile flickered on his face.

"I think it would matter very much indeed," said the landlady. "They had far better NOT govern themselves."

She was, for some reason, becoming angry. The little greenish doctor emptied his glass, and smiled again.

"But what difference does it make," said Aaron Sisson, "whether they govern themselves or not? They only live till they die, either way." And he smiled faintly. He had not really listened to the doctor. The terms "British Government," and "bad for the people--good for the people," made him malevolently angry.

The doctor was nonplussed for a moment. Then he gathered himself together.

"It matters," he said; "it matters.--People should always be responsible for themselves. How can any people be responsible for another race of people, and for a race much older than they are, and not at all children."

Aaron Sisson watched the other's dark face, with its utterly exposed eyes. He was in a state of semi-intoxicated anger and clairvoyance. He saw in the black, void, glistening eyes of the oriental only the same danger, the same menace that he saw in the landlady. Fair, wise, even benevolent words: always the human good speaking, and always underneath, something hateful, something detestable and murderous. Wise speech and good intentions--they were invariably maggoty with these secret inclinations to destroy the man in the man. Whenever he heard anyone holding forth: the landlady, this doctor, the spokesman on the pit bank: or when he read the all-righteous newspaper; his soul curdled with revulsion as from something foul. Even the infernal love and good-will of his wife. To hell with good-will! It was more hateful than ill-will.

Self-righteous bullying, like poison gas!

The landlady looked at the clock.

"Ten minutes to, gentlemen," she said coldly. For she too knew that Aaron was spoiled for her for that night.

The men began to take their leave, shakily. The little doctor seemed to evaporate. The landlady helped Aaron on with his coat. She saw the curious whiteness round his nostrils and his eyes, the fixed hellish look on his face.

"You'll eat a mince-pie in the kitchen with us, for luck?" she said to him, detaining him till last.

But he turned laughing to her.

"Nay," he said, "I must be getting home."

He turned and went straight out of the house. Watching him, the landlady's face became yellow with passion and rage.

"That little poisonous Indian viper," she said aloud, attributing Aaron's mood to the doctor. Her husband was noisily bolting the door.

Outside it was dark and frosty. A gang of men lingered in the road near

the closed door. Aaron found himself among them, his heart bitterer than steel.

The men were dispersing. He should take the road home. But the devil was in it, if he could take a stride in the homeward direction. There seemed a wall in front of him. He veered. But neither could he take a stride in the opposite direction. So he was destined to veer round, like some sort of weather-cock, there in the middle of the dark road outside the "Royal Oak."

But as he turned, he caught sight of a third exit. Almost opposite was the mouth of Shottle Lane, which led off under trees, at right angles to the highroad, up to New Brunswick Colliery. He veered towards the off-chance of this opening, in a delirium of icy fury, and plunged away into the dark lane, walking slowly, on firm legs.