CHAPTER IV. "THE PILLAR OF SALT"

Our story will not yet see daylight. A few days after Christmas, Aaron sat in the open shed at the bottom of his own garden, looking out on the rainy darkness. No one knew he was there. It was some time after six in the evening.

From where he sat, he looked straight up the garden to the house. The blind was not drawn in the middle kitchen, he could see the figures of his wife and one child. There was a light also in the upstairs window. His wife was gone upstairs again. He wondered if she had the baby ill. He could see her figure vaguely behind the lace curtains of the bedroom. It was like looking at his home through the wrong end of a telescope. Now the little girls had gone from the middle room: only to return in a moment.

His attention strayed. He watched the light falling from the window of the next-door house. Uneasily, he looked along the whole range of houses. The street sloped down-hill, and the backs were open to the fields. So he saw a curious succession of lighted windows, between which jutted the intermediary back premises, scullery and outhouse, in dark little blocks. It was something like the keyboard of a piano: more still, like a succession of musical notes. For the rectangular planes of light were of different intensities, some bright and keen, some soft, warm, like candle-light, and there was one surface of pure red light,

one or two were almost invisible, dark green. So the long scale of lights seemed to trill across the darkness, now bright, now dim, swelling and sinking. The effect was strange.

And thus the whole private life of the street was threaded in lights. There was a sense of indecent exposure, from so many backs. He felt himself almost in physical contact with this contiguous stretch of back premises. He heard the familiar sound of water gushing from the sink in to the grate, the dropping of a pail outside the door, the clink of a coal shovel, the banging of a door, the sound of voices. So many houses cheek by jowl, so many squirming lives, so many back yards, back doors giving on to the night. It was revolting.

Away in the street itself, a boy was calling the newspaper: "--'NING POST! --'NING PO-O-ST!" It was a long, melancholy howl, and seemed to epitomise the whole of the dark, wet, secretive, thickly-inhabited night. A figure passed the window of Aaron's own house, entered, and stood inside the room talking to Mrs. Sisson. It was a young woman in a brown mackintosh and a black hat. She stood under the incandescent light, and her hat nearly knocked the globe. Next door a man had run out in his shirt sleeves: this time a young, dark-headed collier running to the gate for a newspaper, running bare-headed, coatless, slippered in the rain. He had got his news-sheet, and was returning. And just at that moment the young man's wife came out, shading her candle with a lading tin. She was going to the coal-house for some coal. Her husband passed her on the threshold. She could be heard breaking the bits of coal and

placing them on the dustpan. The light from her candle fell faintly behind her. Then she went back, blown by a swirl of wind. But again she was at the door, hastily standing her iron shovel against the wall. Then she shut the back door with a bang. These noises seemed to scrape and strike the night.

In Aaron's own house, the young person was still talking to Mrs. Sisson. Millicent came out, sheltering a candle with her hand. The candle blew out. She ran indoors, and emerged again, her white pinafore fluttering. This time she performed her little journey safely. He could see the faint glimmer of her candle emerging secretly from the closet.

The young person was taking her leave. He could hear her sympathetic--"Well--good night! I hope she'll be no worse. Good night Mrs. Sisson!" She was gone--he heard the windy bang of the street-gate. Presently Millicent emerged again, flitting indoors.

So he rose to his feet, balancing, swaying a little before he started into motion, as so many colliers do. Then he moved along the path towards the house, in the rain and darkness, very slowly edging forwards.

Suddenly the door opened. His wife emerged with a pail. He stepped quietly aside, on to his side garden, among the sweet herbs. He could smell rosemary and sage and hyssop. A low wall divided his garden from his neighbour's. He put his hand on it, on its wetness, ready to drop

over should his wife come forward. But she only threw the contents of her pail on the garden and retired again. She might have seen him had she looked. He remained standing where he was, listening to the trickle of rain in the water-butt. The hollow countryside lay beyond him. Sometimes in the windy darkness he could see the red burn of New Brunswick bank, or the brilliant jewels of light clustered at Bestwood Colliery. Away in the dark hollow, nearer, the glare of the electric power-station disturbed the night. So again the wind swirled the rain across all these hieroglyphs of the countryside, familiar to him as his own breast.

A motor-car was labouring up the hill. His trained ear attended to it unconsciously. It stopped with a jar. There was a bang of the yard-gate. A shortish dark figure in a bowler hat passed the window. Millicent was drawing down the blind. It was the doctor. The blind was drawn, he could see no more.

Stealthily he began to approach the house. He stood by the climbing rose of the porch, listening. He heard voices upstairs. Perhaps the children would be downstairs. He listened intently. Voices were upstairs only. He quietly opened the door. The room was empty, save for the baby, who was cooing in her cradle. He crossed to the hall. At the foot of the stairs he could hear the voice of the Indian doctor: "Now little girl, you must just keep still and warm in bed, and not cry for the moon." He said "de moon," just as ever.--Marjory must be ill.

So Aaron quietly entered the parlour. It was a cold, clammy room, dark. He could hear footsteps passing outside on the asphalt pavement below the window, and the wind howling with familiar cadence. He began feeling for something in the darkness of the music-rack beside the piano. He touched and felt--he could not find what he wanted. Perplexed, he turned and looked out of the window. Through the iron railing of the front wall he could see the little motorcar sending its straight beams of light in front of it, up the street.

He sat down on the sofa by the window. The energy had suddenly left all his limbs. He sat with his head sunk, listening. The familiar room, the familiar voice of his wife and his children--he felt weak as if he were dying. He felt weak like a drowning man who acquiesces in the waters. His strength was gone, he was sinking back. He would sink back to it all, float henceforth like a drowned man.

So he heard voices coming nearer from upstairs, feet moving. They were coming down.

"No, Mrs. Sisson, you needn't worry," he heard the voice of the doctor on the stairs. "If she goes on as she is, she'll be all right. Only she must be kept warm and quiet--warm and quiet--that's the chief thing."

"Oh, when she has those bouts I can't bear it," Aaron heard his wife's voice.

They were downstairs. Their feet click-clicked on the tiled passage. They had gone into the middle room. Aaron sat and listened.

"She won't have any more bouts. If she does, give her a few drops from the little bottle, and raise her up. But she won't have any more," the doctor said.

"If she does, I s'll go off my head, I know I shall."

"No, you won't. No, you won't do anything of the sort. You won't go off your head. You'll keep your head on your shoulders, where it ought to be," protested the doctor.

"But it nearly drives me mad."

"Then don't let it. The child won't die, I tell you. She will be all right, with care. Who have you got sitting up with her? You're not to sit up with her tonight, I tell you. Do you hear me?"

"Miss Smitham's coming in. But it's no good--I shall have to sit up. I shall HAVE to."

"I tell you you won't. You obey ME. I know what's good for you as well as for her. I am thinking of you as much as of her."

"But I can't bear it--all alone." This was the beginning of tears. There

was a dead silence--then a sound of Millicent weeping with her mother. As a matter of fact, the doctor was weeping too, for he was an emotional sympathetic soul, over forty.

"Never mind--never mind--you aren't alone," came the doctor's matter-of-fact voice, after a loud nose-blowing. "I am here to help you. I will do whatever I can--whatever I can."

"I can't bear it. I can't bear it," wept the woman.

Another silence, another nose-blowing, and again the doctor:

"You'll HAVE to bear it--I tell you there's nothing else for it. You'll have to bear it--but we'll do our best for you. I will do my best for you--always--ALWAYS--in sickness or out of sickness--There!" He pronounced there oddly, not quite dhere.

"You haven't heard from your husband?" he added.

"I had a letter--"--sobs--"from the bank this morning."

"FROM DE BANK?"

"Telling me they were sending me so much per month, from him, as an allowance, and that he was quite well, but he was travelling."

"Well then, why not let him travel? You can live."

"But to leave me alone," there was burning indignation in her voice. "To go off and leave me with every responsibility, to leave me with all the burden."

"Well I wouldn't trouble about him. Aren't you better off without him?"

"I am. I am," she cried fiercely. "When I got that letter this morning, I said MAY EVIL BEFALL YOU, YOU SELFISH DEMON. And I hope it may."

"Well-well, well-well, don't fret. Don't be angry, it won't make it any better, I tell you."

"Angry! I AM angry. I'm worse than angry. A week ago I hadn't a grey hair in my head. Now look here--" There was a pause.

"Well-well, well-well, never mind. You will be all right, don't you bother. Your hair is beautiful anyhow."

"What makes me so mad is that he should go off like that--never a word--coolly takes his hook. I could kill him for it."

"Were you ever happy together?"

"We were all right at first. I know I was fond of him. But he'd kill anything.--He kept himself back, always kept himself back, couldn't give himself--"

There was a pause.

"Ah well," sighed the doctor. "Marriage is a mystery. I'm glad I'm not entangled in it."

"Yes, to make some woman's life a misery.--I'm sure it was death to live with him, he seemed to kill everything off inside you. He was a man you couldn't quarrel with, and get it over. Quiet--quiet in his tempers, and selfish through and through. I've lived with him twelve years--I know what it is. Killing! You don't know what he was--"

"I think I knew him. A fair man? Yes?" said the doctor.

"Fair to look at.--There's a photograph of him in the parlour--taken when he was married--and one of me.--Yes, he's fairhaired."

Aaron guessed that she was getting a candle to come into the parlour. He was tempted to wait and meet them--and accept it all again. Devilishly tempted, he was. Then he thought of her voice, and his heart went cold. Quick as thought, he obeyed his first impulse. He felt behind the couch, on the floor where the curtains fell. Yes--the bag was there. He took it at once. In the next breath he stepped out of the room and tip-toed

into the passage. He retreated to the far end, near the street door, and stood behind the coats that hung on the hall-stand.

At that moment his wife came into the passage, holding a candle. She was red-eyed with weeping, and looked frail.

"Did YOU leave the parlour door open?" she asked of Millicent, suspiciously.

"No," said Millicent from the kitchen.

The doctor, with his soft, Oriental tread followed Mrs. Sisson into the parlour. Aaron saw his wife hold up the candle before his portrait and begin to weep. But he knew her. The doctor laid his hand softly on her arm, and left it there, sympathetically. Nor did he remove it when Millicent stole into the room, looking very woe-begone and important. The wife wept silently, and the child joined in.

"Yes, I know him," said the doctor. "If he thinks he will be happier when he's gone away, you must be happier too, Mrs. Sisson. That's all. Don't let him triumph over you by making you miserable. You enjoy yourself as well. You're only a girl---"

But a tear came from his eye, and he blew his nose vigorously on a large white silk handkerchief, and began to polish his pince nez. Then he turned, and they all bundled out of the room.

The doctor took his departure. Mrs. Sisson went almost immediately upstairs, and Millicent shortly crept after her. Then Aaron, who had stood motionless as if turned to a pillar of salt, went quietly down the passage and into the living room. His face was very pale, ghastly-looking. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror over the mantel, as he passed, and felt weak, as if he were really a criminal. But his heart did not relax, nevertheless. So he hurried into the night, down the garden, climbed the fence into the field, and went away across the field in the rain, towards the highroad.

He felt sick in every fibre. He almost hated the little handbag he carried, which held his flute and piccolo. It seemed a burden just then--a millstone round his neck. He hated the scene he had left--and he hated the hard, inviolable heart that stuck unchanging in his own breast.

Coming to the high-road, he saw a tall, luminous tram-car roving along through the rain. The trams ran across country from town to town. He dared not board, because people knew him. So he took a side road, and walked in a detour for two miles. Then he came out on the high-road again and waited for a tram-car. The rain blew on his face. He waited a long time for the last car.