

CHAPTER IX. LOW-WATER MARK

Tanny went away to Norway to visit her people, for the first time for three years. Lilly did not go: he did not want to. He came to London and settled in a room over Covent Garden market. The room was high up, a fair size, and stood at the corner of one of the streets and the market itself, looking down on the stalls and the carts and the arcade. Lilly would climb out of the window and sit for hours watching the behaviour of the great draught-horses which brought the mountains of boxes and vegetables. Funny half-human creatures they seemed, so massive and fleshy, yet so Cockney. There was one which could not bear donkeys, and which used to stretch out its great teeth like some massive serpent after every poor diminutive ass that came with a coster's barrow.

Another great horse could not endure standing. It would shake itself and give little starts, and back into the heaps of carrots and broccoli, whilst the driver went into a frenzy of rage.

There was always something to watch. One minute it was two great loads of empty crates, which in passing had got entangled, and reeled, leaning to fall disastrously. Then the drivers cursed and swore and dismounted and stared at their jeopardised loads: till a thin fellow was persuaded to scramble up the airy mountains of cages, like a monkey. And he actually managed to put them to rights. Great sigh of relief when the vans rocked out of the market.

Again there was a particular page-boy in buttons, with a round and perky behind, who nimbly carried a tea-tray from somewhere to somewhere, under the arches beside the market. The great brawny porters would tease him, and he would stop to give them cheek. One afternoon a giant lunged after him: the boy darted gracefully among the heaps of vegetables, still bearing aloft his tea-tray, like some young blue-buttoned acolyte fleeing before a false god. The giant rolled after him--when alas, the acolyte of the tea-tray slipped among the vegetables, and down came the tray. Then tears, and a roar of unfeeling mirth from the giants. Lilly felt they were going to make it up to him.

Another afternoon a young swell sauntered persistently among the vegetables, and Lilly, seated in his high little balcony, wondered why. But at last, a taxi, and a very expensive female, in a sort of silver brocade gown and a great fur shawl and ospreys in her bonnet. Evidently an assignation. Yet what could be more conspicuous than this elegant pair, picking their way through the cabbage-leaves?

And then, one cold grey afternoon in early April, a man in a black overcoat and a bowler hat, walking uncertainly. Lilly had risen and was just retiring out of the chill, damp air. For some reason he lingered to watch the figure. The man was walking east. He stepped rather insecurely off the pavement, and wavered across the setts between the wheels of the standing vans. And suddenly he went down. Lilly could not see him on the ground, but he saw some van-men go forward, and he saw one of them pick up the man's hat.

"I'd better go down," said Lilly to himself.

So he began running down the four long flights of stone stairs, past the many doors of the multifarious business premises, and out into the market. A little crowd had gathered, and a large policeman was just rowing into the centre of the interest. Lilly, always a hoverer on the edge of public commotions, hung now hesitating on the outskirts of the crowd.

"What is it?" he said, to a rather sniffy messenger boy.

"Drunk," said the messenger boy: except that, in unblushing cockney, he pronounced it "Drank."

Lilly hung further back on the edge of the little crowd.

"Come on here. Where d' you want to go?" he heard the hearty tones of the policeman.

"I'm all right. I'm all right," came the testy drunken answer.

"All right, are yer! All right, and then some,--come on, get on your pins."

"I'm all right! I'm all right."

The voice made Lilly peer between the people. And sitting on the granite setts, being hauled up by a burly policeman, he saw our acquaintance Aaron, very pale in the face and a little dishevelled.

"Like me to tuck the sheets round you, shouldn't you? Fancy yourself snug in bed, don't you? You won't believe you're right in the way of traffic, will you now, in Covent Garden Market? Come on, we'll see to you." And the policeman hoisted the bitter and unwilling Aaron.

Lilly was quickly at the centre of the affair, unobtrusive like a shadow, different from the other people.

"Help him up to my room, will you?" he said to the constable. "Friend of mine."

The large constable looked down on the bare-headed wispy, unobtrusive Lilly with good-humoured suspicion and incredulity. Lilly could not have borne it if the policeman had uttered any of this cockney suspicion, so he watched him. There was a great gulf between the public official and the odd, quiet little individual--yet Lilly had his way.

"Which room?" said the policeman, dubious.

Lilly pointed quickly round. Then he said to Aaron:

"Were you coming to see me, Sisson? You'll come in, won't you?"

Aaron nodded rather stupidly and testily. His eyes looked angry.

Somebody stuck his hat on his head for him, and made him look a fool.

Lilly took it off again, and carried it for him. He turned and the crowd eased. He watched Aaron sharply, and saw that it was with difficulty he could walk. So he caught him by the arm on the other side from the policeman, and they crossed the road to the pavement.

"Not so much of this sort of thing these days," said the policeman.

"Not so much opportunity," said Lilly.

"More than there was, though. Coming back to the old days, like. Working round, bit by bit."

They had arrived at the stairs. Aaron stumbled up.

"Steady now! Steady does it!" said the policeman, steering his charge.

There was a curious breach of distance between Lilly and the constable.

At last Lilly opened his own door. The room was pleasant. The fire burned warm, the piano stood open, the sofa was untidy with cushions and papers. Books and papers covered the big writing desk. Beyond the screen made by the bookshelves and the piano were two beds, with washstand by one of the large windows, the one through which Lilly had climbed.

The policeman looked round curiously.

"More cosy here than in the lock-up, sir!" he said.

Lilly laughed. He was hastily clearing the sofa.

"Sit on the sofa, Sisson," he said.

The policeman lowered his charge, with a--

"Right we are, then!"

Lilly felt in his pocket, and gave the policeman half a crown. But he was watching Aaron, who sat stupidly on the sofa, very pale and semi-conscious.

"Do you feel ill, Sisson?" he said sharply.

Aaron looked back at him with heavy eyes, and shook his head slightly.

"I believe you are," said Lilly, taking his hand.

"Might be a bit o' this flu, you know," said the policeman.

"Yes," said Lilly. "Where is there a doctor?" he added, on reflection.

"The nearest?" said the policeman. And he told him. "Leave a message for you, Sir?"

Lilly wrote his address on a card, then changed his mind.

"No, I'll run round myself if necessary," he said.

And the policeman departed.

"You'll go to bed, won't you?" said Lilly to Aaron, when the door was shut. Aaron shook his head sulkily.

"I would if I were you. You can stay here till you're all right. I'm alone, so it doesn't matter."

But Aaron had relapsed into semi-consciousness. Lilly put the big kettle on the gas stove, the little kettle on the fire. Then he hovered in front of the stupefied man. He felt uneasy. Again he took Aaron's hand and felt the pulse.

"I'm sure you aren't well. You must go to bed," he said. And he kneeled and unfastened his visitor's boots. Meanwhile the kettle began to boil, he put a hot-water bottle into the bed.

"Let us get your overcoat off," he said to the stupefied man. "Come

along." And with coaxing and pulling and pushing he got off the overcoat and coat and waistcoat.

At last Aaron was undressed and in bed. Lilly brought him tea. With a dim kind of obedience he took the cup and would drink. He looked at Lilly with heavy eyes.

"I gave in, I gave in to her, else I should ha' been all right," he said.

"To whom?" said Lilly.

"I gave in to her--and afterwards I cried, thinking of Lottie and the children. I felt my heart break, you know. And that's what did it. I should have been all right if I hadn't given in to her--"

"To whom?" said Lilly.

"Josephine. I felt, the minute I was loving her, I'd done myself. And I had. Everything came back on me. If I hadn't given in to her, I should ha' kept all right."

"Don't bother now. Get warm and still--"

"I felt it--I felt it go, inside me, the minute I gave in to her. It's perhaps killed me."

"No, not it. Never mind, be still. Be still, and you'll be all right in the morning."

"It's my own fault, for giving in to her. If I'd kept myself back, my liver wouldn't have broken inside me, and I shouldn't have been sick. And I knew--"

"Never mind now. Have you drunk your tea? Lie down. Lie down, and go to sleep."

Lilly pushed Aaron down in the bed, and covered him over. Then he thrust his hands under the bedclothes and felt his feet--still cold. He arranged the water bottle. Then he put another cover on the bed.

Aaron lay still, rather grey and peaked-looking, in a stillness that was not healthy. For some time Lilly went about stealthily, glancing at his patient from time to time. Then he sat down to read.

He was roused after a time by a moaning of troubled breathing and a fretful stirring in the bed. He went across. Aaron's eyes were open, and dark looking.

"Have a little hot milk," said Lilly.

Aaron shook his head faintly, not noticing.

"A little Bovril?"

The same faint shake.

Then Lilly wrote a note for the doctor, went into the office on the same landing, and got a clerk, who would be leaving in a few minutes, to call with the note. When he came back he found Aaron still watching.

"Are you here by yourself?" asked the sick man.

"Yes. My wife's gone to Norway."

"For good?"

"No," laughed Lilly. "For a couple of months or so. She'll come back here: unless she joins me in Switzerland or somewhere."

Aaron was still for a while.

"You've not gone with her," he said at length.

"To see her people? No, I don't think they want me very badly--and I didn't want very badly to go. Why should I? It's better for married people to be separated sometimes."

"Ay!" said Aaron, watching the other man with fever-darkened eyes.

"I hate married people who are two in one--stuck together like two jujube lozenges," said Lilly.

"Me an' all. I hate 'em myself," said Aaron.

"Everybody ought to stand by themselves, in the first place--men and women as well. They can come together, in the second place, if they like. But nothing is any good unless each one stands alone, intrinsically."

"I'm with you there," said Aaron. "If I'd kep' myself to myself I shouldn't be bad now--though I'm not very bad. I s'll be all right in the morning. But I did myself in when I went with another woman. I felt myself go--as if the bile broke inside me, and I was sick."

"Josephine seduced you?" laughed Lilly.

"Ay, right enough," replied Aaron grimly. "She won't be coming here, will she?"

"Not unless I ask her."

"You won't ask her, though?"

"No, not if you don't want her."

"I don't."

The fever made Aaron naive and communicative, unlike himself. And he knew he was being unlike himself, he knew that he was not in proper control of himself, so he was unhappy, uneasy.

"I'll stop here the night then, if you don't mind," he said.

"You'll have to," said Lilly. "I've sent for the doctor. I believe you've got the flu."

"Think I have?" said Aaron frightened.

"Don't be scared," laughed Lilly.

There was a long pause. Lilly stood at the window looking at the darkening market, beneath the street-lamps.

"I s'll have to go to the hospital, if I have," came Aaron's voice.

"No, if it's only going to be a week or a fortnight's business, you can stop here. I've nothing to do," said Lilly.

"There's no occasion for you to saddle yourself with me," said Aaron

dejectedly.

"You can go to your hospital if you like--or back to your lodging--if you wish to," said Lilly. "You can make up your mind when you see how you are in the morning."

"No use going back to my lodgings," said Aaron.

"I'll send a telegram to your wife if you like," said Lilly.

Aaron was silent, dead silent, for some time.

"Nay," he said at length, in a decided voice. "Not if I die for it."

Lilly remained still, and the other man lapsed into a sort of semi-sleep, motionless and abandoned. The darkness had fallen over London, and away below the lamps were white.

Lilly lit the green-shaded reading lamp over the desk. Then he stood and looked at Aaron, who lay still, looking sick. Rather beautiful the bones of the countenance: but the skull too small for such a heavy jaw and rather coarse mouth. Aaron half-opened his eyes, and writhed feverishly, as if his limbs could not be in the right place. Lilly mended the fire, and sat down to write. Then he got up and went downstairs to unfasten the street door, so that the doctor could walk up. The business people had gone from their various holes, all the lower part of the tall house

was in darkness.

Lilly waited and waited. He boiled an egg and made himself toast. Aaron said he might eat the same. Lilly cooked another egg and took it to the sick man. Aaron looked at it and pushed it away with nausea. He would have some tea. So Lilly gave him tea.

"Not much fun for you, doing this for somebody who is nothing to you," said Aaron.

"I shouldn't if you were unsympathetic to me," said Lilly. "As it is, it's happened so, and so we'll let be."

"What time is it?"

"Nearly eight o'clock."

"Oh, my Lord, the opera."

And Aaron got half out of bed. But as he sat on the bedside he knew he could not safely get to his feet. He remained a picture of dejection.

"Perhaps we ought to let them know," said Lilly.

But Aaron, blank with stupid misery, sat huddled there on the bedside without answering.

"Ill run round with a note," said Lilly. "I suppose others have had flu, besides you. Lie down!"

But Aaron stupidly and dejectedly sat huddled on the side of the bed, wearing old flannel pyjamas of Lilly's, rather small for him. He felt too sick to move.

"Lie down! Lie down!" said Lilly. "And keep still while I'm gone. I shan't be more than ten minutes."

"I don't care if I die," said Aaron.

Lilly laughed.

"You're a long way from dying," said he, "or you wouldn't say it."

But Aaron only looked up at him with queer, far-off, haggard eyes, something like a criminal who is just being executed.

"Lie down!" said Lilly, pushing him gently into the bed. "You won't improve yourself sitting there, anyhow."

Aaron lay down, turned away, and was quite still. Lilly quietly left the room on his errand.

The doctor did not come until ten o'clock: and worn out with work when he did come.

"Isn't there a lift in this establishment?" he said, as he groped his way up the stone stairs. Lilly had heard him, and run down to meet him.

The doctor poked the thermometer under Aaron's tongue and felt the pulse. Then he asked a few questions: listened to the heart and breathing.

"Yes, it's the flu," he said curtly. "Nothing to do but to keep warm in bed and not move, and take plenty of milk and liquid nourishment. I'll come round in the morning and give you an injection. Lungs are all right so far."

"How long shall I have to be in bed?" said Aaron.

"Oh--depends. A week at least."

Aaron watched him sullenly--and hated him. Lilly laughed to himself. The sick man was like a dog that is ill but which growls from a deep corner, and will bite if you put your hand in. He was in a state of black depression.

Lilly settled him down for the night, and himself went to bed. Aaron squirmed with heavy, pained limbs, the night through, and slept and had

bad dreams. Lilly got up to give him drinks. The din in the market was terrific before dawn, and Aaron suffered bitterly.

In the morning he was worse. The doctor gave him injections against pneumonia.

"You wouldn't like me to wire to your wife?" said Lilly.

"No," said Aaron abruptly. "You can send me to the hospital. I'm nothing but a piece of carrion."

"Carrion!" said Lilly. "Why?"

"I know it. I feel like it."

"Oh, that's only the sort of nauseated feeling you get with flu."

"I'm only fit to be thrown underground, and made an end of. I can't stand myself--"

He had a ghastly, grey look of self-repulsion.

"It's the germ that makes you feel like that," said Lilly. "It poisons the system for a time. But you'll work it off."

At evening he was no better, the fever was still high. Yet there were no

complications--except that the heart was irregular.

"The one thing I wonder," said Lilly, "is whether you hadn't better be moved out of the noise of the market. It's fearful for you in the early morning."

"It makes no difference to me," said Aaron.

The next day he was a little worse, if anything. The doctor knew there was nothing to be done. At evening he gave the patient a calomel pill. It was rather strong, and Aaron had a bad time. His burning, parched, poisoned inside was twisted and torn. Meanwhile carts banged, porters shouted, all the hell of the market went on outside, away down on the cobble setts. But this time the two men did not hear.

"You'll feel better now," said Lilly, "after the operation."

"It's done me harm," cried Aaron fretfully. "Send me to the hospital, or you'll repent it. Get rid of me in time."

"Nay," said Lilly. "You get better. Damn it, you're only one among a million."

Again over Aaron's face went the ghastly grimace of self-repulsion.

"My soul's gone rotten," he said.

"No," said Lilly. "Only toxin in the blood."

Next day the patient seemed worse, and the heart more irregular. He rested badly. So far, Lilly had got a fair night's rest. Now Aaron was not sleeping, and he seemed to struggle in the bed.

"Keep your courage up, man," said the doctor sharply. "You give way."

Aaron looked at him blackly, and did not answer.

In the night Lilly was up time after time. Aaron would slip down on his back, and go semi-conscious. And then he would awake, as if drowning, struggling to move, mentally shouting aloud, yet making no sound for some moments, mentally shouting in frenzy, but unable to stir or make a sound. When at last he got some sort of physical control he cried: "Lift me up! Lift me up!"

Lilly hurried and lifted him up, and he sat panting with a sobbing motion, his eyes gloomy and terrified, more than ever like a criminal who is just being executed. He drank brandy, and was laid down on his side.

"Don't let me lie on my back," he said, terrified. "No, I won't," said Lilly. Aaron frowned curiously on his nurse. "Mind you don't let me," he said, exacting and really terrified.

"No, I won't let you."

And now Lilly was continually crossing over and pulling Aaron on to his side, whenever he found him slipped down on his back.

In the morning the doctor was puzzled. Probably it was the toxin in the blood which poisoned the heart. There was no pneumonia. And yet Aaron was clearly growing worse. The doctor agreed to send in a nurse for the coming night.

"What's the matter with you, man!" he said sharply to his patient. "You give way! You give way! Can't you pull yourself together?"

But Aaron only became more gloomily withheld, retracting from life. And Lilly began to be really troubled. He got a friend to sit with the patient in the afternoon, whilst he himself went out and arranged to sleep in Aaron's room, at his lodging.

The next morning, when he came in, he found the patient lying as ever, in a sort of heap in the bed. Nurse had had to lift him up and hold him up again. And now Aaron lay in a sort of semi-stupor of fear, frustrated anger, misery and self-repulsion: a sort of interlocked depression.

The doctor frowned when he came. He talked with the nurse, and wrote another prescription. Then he drew Lilly away to the door.

"What's the matter with the fellow?" he said. "Can't you rouse his spirit? He seems to be sulking himself out of life. He'll drop out quite suddenly, you know, if he goes on like this. Can't you rouse him up?"

"I think it depresses him partly that his bowels won't work. It frightens him. He's never been ill in his life before," said Lilly.

"His bowels won't work if he lets all his spirit go, like an animal dying of the sulks," said the doctor impatiently. "He might go off quite suddenly--dead before you can turn round--"

Lilly was properly troubled. Yet he did not quite know what to do. It was early afternoon, and the sun was shining into the room. There were daffodils and anemones in a jar, and freezias and violets. Down below in the market were two stalls of golden and blue flowers, gay.

"The flowers are lovely in the spring sunshine," said Lilly. "I wish I were in the country, don't you? As soon as you are better we'll go. It's been a terrible cold, wet spring. But now it's going to be nice. Do you like being in the country?"

"Yes," said Aaron.

He was thinking of his garden. He loved it. Never in his life had he been away from a garden before.

"Make haste and get better, and we'll go."

"Where?" said Aaron.

"Hampshire. Or Berkshire. Or perhaps you'd like to go home? Would you?"

Aaron lay still, and did not answer.

"Perhaps you want to, and you don't want to," said Lilly. "You can please yourself, anyhow."

There was no getting anything definite out of the sick man--his soul seemed stuck, as if it would not move.

Suddenly Lilly rose and went to the dressing-table.

"I'm going to rub you with oil," he said. "I'm going to rub you as mothers do their babies whose bowels don't work."

Aaron frowned slightly as he glanced at the dark, self-possessed face of the little man.

"What's the good of that?" he said irritably. "I'd rather be left alone."

"Then you won't be."

Quickly he uncovered the blond lower body of his patient, and began to rub the abdomen with oil, using a slow, rhythmic, circulating motion, a sort of massage. For a long time he rubbed finely and steadily, then went over the whole of the lower body, mindless, as if in a sort of incantation. He rubbed every speck of the man's lower body--the abdomen, the buttocks, the thighs and knees, down to the feet, rubbed it all warm and glowing with camphorated oil, every bit of it, chafing the toes swiftly, till he was almost exhausted. Then Aaron was covered up again, and Lilly sat down in fatigue to look at his patient.

He saw a change. The spark had come back into the sick eyes, and the faint trace of a smile, faintly luminous, into the face. Aaron was regaining himself. But Lilly said nothing. He watched his patient fall into a proper sleep.

And he sat and watched him sleep. And he thought to himself: "I wonder why I do it. I wonder why I bother with him.... Jim ought to have taught me my lesson. As soon as this man's really better he'll punch me in the wind, metaphorically if not actually, for having interfered with him.

And Tanny would say, he was quite right to do it. She says I want power over them. What if I do? They don't care how much power the mob has over them, the nation, Lloyd George and Northcliffe and the police and money. They'll yield themselves up to that sort of power quickly enough, and immolate themselves pro bono publico by the million. And what's

the bonum publicum but a mob power? Why can't they submit to a bit of healthy individual authority? The fool would die, without me: just as that fool Jim will die in hysterics one day. Why does he last so long!

"Tanny's the same. She does nothing really but resist me: my authority, or my influence, or just ME. At the bottom of her heart she just blindly and persistently opposes me. God knows what it is she opposes: just me myself. She thinks I want her to submit to me. So I do, in a measure natural to our two selves. Somewhere, she ought to submit to me. But they all prefer to kick against the pricks. Not that THEY get many pricks. I get them. Damn them all, why don't I leave them alone? They only grin and feel triumphant when they've insulted one and punched one in the wind.

"This Aaron will do just the same. I like him, and he ought to like me. And he'll be another Jim: he WILL like me, if he can knock the wind out of me. A lot of little Stavrogins coming up to whisper affectionately, and biting one's ear.

"But anyhow I can soon see the last of this chap: and him the last of all the rest. I'll be damned for ever if I see their Jims and Roberts and Julias and Scotts any more. Let them dance round their insipid hell-broth. Thin tack it is.

"There's a whole world besides this little gang of Europeans. Except, dear God, that they've exterminated all the peoples worth knowing. I

can't do with folk who teem by the billion, like the Chinese and Japs and orientals altogether. Only vermin teem by the billion. Higher types breed slower. I would have loved the Aztecs and the Red Indians. I KNOW they hold the element in life which I am looking for--they had living pride. Not like the flea-bitten Asiatics--even niggers are better than Asiatics, though they are wallowers--the American races--and the South Sea Islanders--the Marquesans, the Maori blood. That was the true blood. It wasn't frightened. All the rest are craven--Europeans, Asiatics, Africans--everyone at his own individual quick craven and cringing: only conceited in the mass, the mob. How I hate them: the mass-bullies, the individual Judases.

"Well, if one will be a Jesus he must expect his Judas. That's why Abraham Lincoln gets shot. A Jesus makes a Judas inevitable. A man should remain himself, not try to spread himself over humanity. He should pivot himself on his own pride.

"I suppose really I ought to have packed this Aaron off to the hospital. Instead of which here am I rubbing him with oil to rub the life into him. And I KNOW he'll bite me, like a warmed snake, the moment he recovers. And Tanny will say 'Quite right, too,' I shouldn't have been so intimate. No, I should have left it to mechanical doctors and nurses.

"So I should. Everything to its own. And Aaron belongs to this little system, and Jim is waiting to be psychoanalysed, and Tanny is waiting for her own glorification.

"All right, Aaron. Last time I break my bread for anybody, this is. So get better, my flautist, so that I can go away.

"It was easy for the Red Indians and the Others to take their hook into death. They might have stayed a bit longer to help one to defy the white masses.

"I'll make some tea--"

Lilly rose softly and went across to the fire. He had to cross a landing to a sort of little lavatory, with a sink and a tap, for water. The clerks peeped out at him from an adjoining office and nodded. He nodded, and disappeared from their sight as quickly as possible, with his kettle. His dark eyes were quick, his dark hair was untidy, there was something silent and withheld about him. People could never approach him quite ordinarily.

He put on the kettle, and quietly set cups and plates on a tray. The room was clean and cosy and pleasant. He did the cleaning himself, and was as efficient and inobtrusive a housewife as any woman. While the kettle boiled, he sat darning the socks which he had taken off Aaron's feet when the flautist arrived, and which he had washed. He preferred that no outsider should see him doing these things. Yet he preferred also to do them himself, so that he should be independent of outside aid.

His face was dark and hollow, he seemed frail, sitting there in the London afternoon darning the black woollen socks. His full brow was knitted slightly, there was a tension. At the same time, there was an indomitable stillness about him, as it were in the atmosphere about him. His hands, though small, were not very thin. He bit off the wool as he finished his darn.

As he was making the tea he saw Aaron rouse up in bed.

"I've been to sleep. I feel better," said the patient, turning round to look what the other man was doing. And the sight of the water steaming in a jet from the teapot seemed attractive.

"Yes," said Lilly. "You've slept for a good two hours."

"I believe I have," said Aaron.

"Would you like a little tea?"

"Ay--and a bit of toast."

"You're not supposed to have solid food. Let me take your temperature."

The temperature was down to a hundred, and Lilly, in spite of the doctor, gave Aaron a piece of toast with his tea, enjoining him not to

mention it to the nurse.

In the evening the two men talked.

"You do everything for yourself, then?" said Aaron.

"Yes, I prefer it."

"You like living all alone?"

"I don't know about that. I never have lived alone. Tanny and I have been very much alone in various countries: but that's two, not one."

"You miss her then?"

"Yes, of course. I missed her horribly in the cottage, when she'd first gone. I felt my heart was broken. But here, where we've never been together, I don't notice it so much."

"She'll come back," said Aaron.

"Yes, she'll come back. But I'd rather meet her abroad than here--and get on a different footing."

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. There's something with marriage altogether, I think.
Egoisme a deux--"

"What's that mean?"

"Egoisme a deux? Two people, one egoism. Marriage is a self-conscious
egoistic state, it seems to me."

"You've got no children?" said Aaron.

"No. Tanny wants children badly. I don't. I'm thankful we have none."

"Why?"

"I can't quite say. I think of them as a burden. Besides, there ARE such
millions and billions of children in the world. And we know well enough
what sort of millions and billions of people they'll grow up into. I
don't want to add my quota to the mass--it's against my instinct--"

"Ay!" laughed Aaron, with a curt acquiescence.

"Tanny's furious. But then, when a woman has got children, she thinks
the world wags only for them and her. Nothing else. The whole world wags
for the sake of the children--and their sacred mother."

"Ay, that's DAMNED true," said Aaron.

"And myself, I'm sick of the children stunt. Children are all right, so long as you just take them for what they are: young immature things like kittens and half-grown dogs, nuisances, sometimes very charming. But I'll be hanged if I can see anything high and holy about children. I should be sorry, too, it would be so bad for the children. Young brats, tiresome and amusing in turns."

"When they don't give themselves airs," said Aaron.

"Yes, indeed. Which they do half the time. Sacred children, and sacred motherhood, I'm absolutely fed stiff by it. That's why I'm thankful I have no children. Tanny can't come it over me there."

"It's a fact. When a woman's got her children, by God, she's a bitch in the manger. You can starve while she sits on the hay. It's useful to keep her pups warm."

"Yes."

"Why, you know," Aaron turned excitedly in the bed, "they look on a man as if he was nothing but an instrument to get and rear children. If you have anything to do with a woman, she thinks it's because you want to get children by her. And I'm damned if it is. I want my own pleasure, or nothing: and children be damned."

"Ah, women--THEY must be loved, at any price!" said Lilly. "And if you just don't want to love them--and tell them so--what a crime."

"A crime!" said Aaron. "They make a criminal of you. Them and their children be cursed. Is my life given me for nothing but to get children, and work to bring them up? See them all in hell first. They'd better die while they're children, if childhood's all that important."

"I quite agree," said Lilly. "If childhood is more important than manhood, then why live to be a man at all? Why not remain an infant?"

"Be damned and blasted to women and all their importances," cried Aaron. "They want to get you under, and children is their chief weapon."

"Men have got to stand up to the fact that manhood is more than childhood--and then force women to admit it," said Lilly. "But the rotten whiners, they're all grovelling before a baby's napkin and a woman's petticoat."

"It's a fact," said Aaron. But he glanced at Lilly oddly, as if suspiciously. And Lilly caught the look. But he continued:

"And if they think you try to stand on your legs and walk with the feet of manhood, why, there isn't a blooming father and lover among them but will do his best to get you down and suffocate you--either with a baby's napkin or a woman's petticoat."

Lilly's lips were curling; he was dark and bitter.

"Ay, it is like that," said Aaron, rather subduedly.

"The man's spirit has gone out of the world. Men can't move an inch unless they can grovel humbly at the end of the journey."

"No," said Aaron, watching with keen, half-amused eyes.

"That's why marriage wants readjusting--or extending--to get men on to their own legs once more, and to give them the adventure again. But men won't stick together and fight for it. Because once a woman has climbed up with her children, she'll find plenty of grovellers ready to support her and suffocate any defiant spirit. And women will sacrifice eleven men, fathers, husbands, brothers and lovers, for one baby--or for her own female self-conceit--"

"She will that," said Aaron.

"And can you find two men to stick together, without feeling criminal, and without cringing, and without betraying one another? You can't. One is sure to go fawning round some female, then they both enjoy giving each other away, and doing a new grovel before a woman again."

"Ay," said Aaron.

After which Lilly was silent.