CHAPTER XI. MORE PILLAR OF SALT

The opera season ended, Aaron was invited by Cyril Scott to join a group of musical people in a village by the sea. He accepted, and spent a pleasant month. It pleased the young men musically-inclined and bohemian by profession to patronise the flautist, whom they declared marvellous. Bohemians with well-to-do parents, they could already afford to squander a little spasmodic and self-gratifying patronage. And Aaron did not mind being patronised. He had nothing else to do.

But the party broke up early in September. The flautist was detained a few days at a country house, for the amusement of the guests. Then he left for London.

In London he found himself at a loose end. A certain fretful dislike of the patronage of indifferent young men, younger than himself, and a certain distaste for regular work in the orchestra made him look round. He wanted something else. He wanted to disappear again. Qualms and emotions concerning his abandoned family overcame him. The early, delicate autumn affected him. He took a train to the Midlands.

And again, just after dark, he strolled with his little bag across the field which lay at the end of his garden. It had been mown, and the grass was already growing long. He stood and looked at the line of back windows, lighted once more. He smelled the scents of autumn, phlox and

moist old vegetation and corn in sheaf. A nostalgia which was half at least revulsion affected him. The place, the home, at once fascinated and revolted him.

Sitting in his shed, he scrutinised his garden carefully, in the starlight. There were two rows of beans, rather disshevelled. Near at hand the marrow plants sprawled from their old bed. He could detect the perfume of a few carnations. He wondered who it was had planted the garden, during his long absence. Anyhow, there it was, planted and fruited and waning into autumn.

The blind was not drawn. It was eight o'clock. The children were going to bed. Aaron waited in his shed, his bowels stirred with violent but only half-admitted emotions. There was his wife, slim and graceful, holding a little mug to the baby's mouth. And the baby was drinking. She looked lonely. Wild emotions attacked his heart. There was going to be a wild and emotional reconciliation.

Was there? It seemed like something fearful and imminent. A passion arose in him, a craving for the violent emotional reconciliation. He waited impatiently for the children to be gone to bed, gnawed with restless desire.

He heard the clock strike nine, then half-past, from the village behind. The children would be asleep. His wife was sitting sewing some little frock. He went lingering down the garden path, stooping to lift the

fallen carnations, to see how they were. There were many flowers, but small. He broke one off, then threw it away. The golden rod was out. Even in the little lawn there were asters, as of old.

His wife started to listen, hearing his step. He was filled with a violent conflict of tenderness, like a sickness. He hesitated, tapping at the door, and entered. His wife started to her feet, at bay.

"What have you come for!" was her involuntary ejaculation.

But he, with the familiar odd jerk of his head towards the garden, asked with a faint smile:

"Who planted the garden?"

And he felt himself dropping into the twang of the vernacular, which he had discarded.

Lottie only stood and stared at him, objectively. She did not think to answer. He took his hat off, and put it on the dresser. Again the familiar act maddened her.

"What have you come for?" she cried again, with a voice full of hate. Or perhaps it was fear and doubt and even hope as well. He heard only hate.

This time he turned to look at her. The old dagger was drawn in her.

"I wonder," he said, "myself."

Then she recovered herself, and with trembling hand picked up her sewing again. But she still stood at bay, beyond the table. She said nothing. He, feeling tired, sat down on the chair nearest the door. But he reached for his hat, and kept it on his knee. She, as she stood there unnaturally, went on with her sewing. There was silence for some time. Curious sensations and emotions went through the man's frame seeming to destroy him. They were like electric shocks, which he felt she emitted against him. And an old sickness came in him again. He had forgotten it. It was the sickness of the unrecognised and incomprehensible strain between him and her.

After a time she put down her sewing, and sat again in her chair.

"Do you know how vilely you've treated me?" she said, staring across the space at him. He averted his face.

Yet he answered, not without irony.

"I suppose so."

"And why?" she cried. "I should like to know why."

He did not answer. The way she rushed in made him go vague.

"Justify yourself. Say why you've been so vile to me. Say what you had against me," she demanded.

"What I HAD against her," he mused to himself: and he wondered that she used the past tense. He made no answer.

"Accuse me," she insisted. "Say what I've done to make you treat me like this. Say it. You must THINK it hard enough."

"Nay," he said. "I don't think it."

This speech, by which he merely meant that he did not trouble to formulate any injuries he had against her, puzzled her.

"Don't come pretending you love me, NOW. It's too late," she said with contempt. Yet perhaps also hope.

"You might wait till I start pretending," he said.

This enraged her.

"You vile creature!" she exclaimed. "Go! What have you come for?"

"To look at YOU," he said sarcastically.

After a few minutes she began to cry, sobbing violently into her apron. And again his bowels stirred and boiled.

"What have I done! What have I done! I don't know what I've done that he should be like this to me," she sobbed, into her apron. It was childish, and perhaps true. At least it was true from the childish part of her nature. He sat gloomy and uneasy.

She took the apron from her tear-stained face, and looked at him. It was true, in her moments of roused exposure she was a beautiful woman--a beautiful woman. At this moment, with her flushed, tear-stained, wilful distress, she was beautiful.

"Tell me," she challenged. "Tell me! Tell me what I've done. Tell me what you have against me. Tell me."

Watching like a lynx, she saw the puzzled, hurt look in his face. Telling isn't so easy--especially when the trouble goes too deep for conscious comprehension. He couldn't tell what he had against her. And he had not the slightest intention of doing what she would have liked him to do, starting to pile up detailed grievances. He knew the detailed grievances were nothing in themselves.

"You CAN'T," she cried vindictively. "You CAN'T. You CAN'T find anything real to bring against me, though you'd like to. You'd like to be able to accuse me of something, but you CAN'T, because you know there isn't

anything."

She watched him, watched. And he sat in the chair near the door, without moving.

"You're unnatural, that's what you are," she cried. "You're unnatural. You're not a man. You haven't got a man's feelings. You're nasty, and cold, and unnatural. And you're a coward. You're a coward. You run away from me, without telling me what you've got against me."

"When you've had enough, you go away and you don't care what you do," he said, epigrammatic.

She paused a moment.

"Enough of what?" she said. "What have you had enough of? Of me and your children? It's a nice manly thing to say. Haven't I loved you? Haven't I loved you for twelve years, and worked and slaved for you and tried to keep you right? Heaven knows where you'd have been but for me, evil as you are at the bottom. You're evil, that's what it is--and weak. You're too weak to love a woman and give her what she wants: too weak. Unmanly and cowardly, he runs away."

"No wonder," he said.

"No," she cried. "It IS no wonder, with a nature like yours: weak and

unnatural and evil. It IS no wonder."

She became quiet--and then started to cry again, into her apron. Aaron waited. He felt physically weak.

"And who knows what you've been doing all these months?" she wept. "Who knows all the vile things you've been doing? And you're the father of my children--the father of my little girls--and who knows what vile things he's guilty of, all these months?"

"I shouldn't let my imagination run away with me," he answered. "I've been playing the flute in the orchestra of one of the theatres in London."

"Ha!" she cried. "It's more than that. Don't think I'm going to believe you. I know you, with your smooth-sounding lies. You're a liar, as you know. And I know you've been doing other things besides play a flute in an orchestra. You!--as if I don't know you. And then coming crawling back to me with your lies and your pretense. Don't think I'm taken in."

"I should be sorry," he said.

"Coming crawling back to me, and expecting to be forgiven," she went on. "But no--I don't forgive--and I can't forgive--never--not as long as I live shall I forgive what you've done to me."

"You can wait till you're asked, anyhow," he said.

"And you can wait," she said. "And you shall wait." She took up her sewing, and stitched steadily, as if calmly. Anyone glancing in would have imagined a quiet domestic hearth at that moment. He, too, feeling physically weak, remained silent, feeling his soul absent from the scene.

Again she suddenly burst into tears, weeping bitterly.

"And the children," she sobbed, rocking herself with grief and chagrin. "What have I been able to say to the children--what have I been able to tell them?"

"What HAVE you told them?" he asked coldly.

"I told them you'd gone away to work," she sobbed, laying her head on her arms on the table. "What else could I tell them? I couldn't tell them the vile truth about their father. I couldn't tell THEM how evil you are." She sobbed and moaned.

He wondered what exactly the vile truth would have been, had she started to tell it. And he began to feel, coldly and cynically, that among all her distress there was a luxuriating in the violent emotions of the scene in hand, and the situation altogether.

Then again she became quiet, and picked up her sewing. She stitched quietly, wistfully, for some time. Then she looked up at him--a long look of reproach, and sombre accusation, and wifely tenderness. He turned his face aside.

"You know you've been wrong to me, don't you?" she said, half wistfully, half menacing.

He felt her wistfulness and her menace tearing him in his bowels and loins.

"You do know, don't you?" she insisted, still with the wistful appeal, and the veiled threat.

"You do, or you would answer," she said. "You've still got enough that's right in you, for you to know."

She waited. He sat still, as if drawn by hot wires.

Then she slipped across to him, put her arms round him, sank on her knees at his side, and sank her face against his thigh.

"Say you know how wrong you are. Say you know how cruel you've been to me," she pleaded. But under her female pleading and appeal he felt the iron of her threat.

"You DO know it," she murmured, looking up into his face as she crouched by his knee. "You DO know it. I can see in your eyes that you know it. And why have you come back to me, if you don't know it! Why have you come back to me? Tell me!" Her arms gave him a sharp, compulsory little clutch round the waist. "Tell me! Tell me!" she murmured, with all her appeal liquid in her throat.

But him, it half overcame, and at the same time, horrified. He had a certain horror of her. The strange liquid sound of her appeal seemed to him like the swaying of a serpent which mesmerises the fated, fluttering, helpless bird. She clasped her arms round him, she drew him to her, she half roused his passion. At the same time she coldly horrified and repelled him. He had not the faintest feeling, at the moment, of his own wrong. But she wanted to win his own self-betrayal out of him. He could see himself as the fascinated victim, falling to this cajoling, awful woman, the wife of his bosom. But as well, he had a soul outside himself, which looked on the whole scene with cold revulsion, and which was as unchangeable as time.

"No," he said. "I don't feel wrong."

"You DO!" she said, giving him a sharp, admonitory clutch. "You DO. Only you're silly, and obstinate, babyish and silly and obstinate. An obstinate little boy--you DO feel wrong. And you ARE wrong. And you've got to say it."

But quietly he disengaged himself and got to his feet, his face pale and set, obstinate as she said. He put his hat on, and took his little bag. She watched him curiously, still crouching by his chair.

"I'll go," he said, putting his hand on the latch.

Suddenly she sprang to her feet and clutched him by the shirt-neck, her hand inside his soft collar, half strangling him.

"You villain," she said, and her face was transfigured with passion as he had never seen it before, horrible. "You villain!" she said thickly. "What have you come here for?"

His soul went black as he looked at her. He broke her hand away from his shirt collar, bursting the stud-holes. She recoiled in silence. And in one black, unconscious movement he was gone, down the garden and over the fence and across the country, swallowed in a black unconsciousness.

She, realising, sank upon the hearth-rug and lay there curled upon herself. She was defeated. But she, too, would never yield. She lay quite motionless for some time. Then she got up, feeling the draught on the floor. She closed the door, and drew down the blind. Then she looked at her wrist, which he had gripped, and which pained her. Then she went to the mirror and looked for a long time at her white, strained, determined face. Come life, come death, she, too would never yield. And she realised now that he would never yield.

She was faint with weariness, and would be glad to get to bed and sleep.

Aaron meanwhile had walked across the country and was looking for a place to rest. He found a cornfield with a half-built stack, and sheaves in stook. Ten to one some tramp would have found the stack. He threw a dozen sheaves together and lay down, looking at the stars in the September sky. He, too, would never yield. The illusion of love was gone for ever. Love was a battle in which each party strove for the mastery of the other's soul. So far, man had yielded the mastery to woman. Now he was fighting for it back again. And too late, for the woman would never yield.

But whether woman yielded or not, he would keep the mastery of his own soul and conscience and actions. He would never yield himself up to her judgment again. He would hold himself forever beyond her jurisdiction.

Henceforth, life single, not life double.

He looked at the sky, and thanked the universe for the blessedness of being alone in the universe. To be alone, to be oneself, not to be driven or violated into something which is not oneself, surely it is better than anything. He thought of Lottie, and knew how much more truly herself she was when she was alone, with no man to distort her. And he was thankful for the division between them. Such scenes as the last were too horrible and unreal.

As for future unions, too soon to think about it. Let there be clean and pure division first, perfected singleness. That is the only way to final, living unison: through sheer, finished singleness.