CHAPTER XII. NOVARA

Having no job for the autumn, Aaron fidgetted in London. He played at some concerts and some private shows. He was one of an odd quartette, for example, which went to play to Lady Artemis Hooper, when she lay in bed after her famous escapade of falling through the window of her taxi-cab. Aaron had that curious knack, which belongs to some people, of getting into the swim without knowing he was doing it. Lady Artemis thought his flute lovely, and had him again to play for her. Aaron looked at her and she at him. She, as she reclined there in bed in a sort of half-light, well made-up, smoking her cigarettes and talking in a rather raucous voice, making her slightly rasping witty comments to the other men in the room--of course there were other men, the audience--was a shock to the flautist. This was the bride of the moment! Curious how raucous her voice sounded out of the cigarette smoke. Yet he liked her--the reckless note of the modern, social freebooter. In himself was a touch of the same quality.

"Do you love playing?" she asked him.

"Yes," he said, with that shadow of irony which seemed like a smile on his face.

"Live for it, so to speak," she said.

"I make my living by it," he said.

"But that's not really how you take it?" she said. He eyed her. She watched him over her cigarette. It was a personal moment.

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

"I'm sure you don't. You wouldn't be so good if you did. You're awfully lucky, you know, to be able to pour yourself down your flute."

"You think I go down easy?" he laughed.

"Ah!" she replied, flicking her cigarette broadcast. "That's the point. What should you say, Jimmy?" she turned to one of the men. He screwed his eyeglass nervously and stiffened himself to look at her.

"I--I shouldn't like to say, off-hand," came the small-voiced, self-conscious answer. And Jimmy bridled himself and glanced at Aaron.

"Do you find it a tight squeeze, then?" she said, turning to Aaron once more.

"No, I can't say that," he answered. "What of me goes down goes down easy enough. It's what doesn't go down."

"And how much is that?" she asked, eying him.

"A good bit, maybe," he said.

"Slops over, so to speak," she retorted sarcastically. "And which do you enjoy more, trickling down your flute or slopping over on to the lap of Mother Earth--of Miss, more probably!"

"Depends," he said.

Having got him a few steps too far upon the personal ground, she left him to get off by himself.

So he found London got on his nerves. He felt it rubbed him the wrong way. He was flattered, of course, by his own success--and felt at the same time irritated by it. This state of mind was by no means acceptable. Wherever he was he liked to be given, tacitly, the first place--or a place among the first. Among the musical people he frequented, he found himself on a callow kind of equality with everybody, even the stars and aristocrats, at one moment, and a backstairs outsider the next. It was all just as the moment demanded. There was a certain excitement in slithering up and down the social scale, one minute chatting in a personal tete-a-tete with the most famous, or notorious, of the society beauties: and the next walking in the rain, with his flute in a bag, to his grubby lodging in Bloomsbury. Only the excitement roused all the savage sarcasm that lay at the bottom of his soul, and which burned there like an unhealthy bile.

Therefore he determined to clear out--to disappear. He had a letter from Lilly, from Novara. Lilly was drifting about. Aaron wrote to Novara, and asked if he should come to Italy, having no money to speak of. "Come if you want to. Bring your flute. And if you've no money, put on a good suit of clothes and a big black hat, and play outside the best cafe in any Italian town, and you'll collect enough to get on with."

It was a sporting chance. Aaron packed his bag and got a passport, and wrote to Lilly to say he would join him, as invited, at Sir William Franks'. He hoped Lilly's answer would arrive before he left London. But it didn't.

Therefore behold our hero alighting at Novara, two hours late, on a wet, dark evening. He hoped Lilly would be there: but nobody. With some slight dismay he faced the big, crowded station. The stream of people carried him automatically through the barrier, a porter having seized his bag, and volleyed various unintelligible questions at him. Aaron understood not one word. So he just wandered after the blue blouse of the porter.

The porter deposited the bag on the steps of the station front, fired off more questions and gesticulated into the half-illuminated space of darkness outside the station. Aaron decided it meant a cab, so he nodded and said "Yes." But there were no cabs. So once more the blue-bloused porter slung the big bag and the little bag on the strap over his

shoulder, and they plunged into the night, towards some lights and a sort of theatre place.

One carriage stood there in the rain--yes, and it was free.

"Keb? Yes--orright--sir. Whe'to? Where you go? Sir William Franks? Yes, I know. Long way go--go long way. Sir William Franks."

The cabman spattered his few words of English. Aaron gave the porter an English shilling. The porter let the coin lie in the middle of his palm, as if it were a live beetle, and darted to the light of the carriage to examine the beast, exclaiming volubly. The cabman, wild with interest, peered down from the box into the palm of the porter, and carried on an impassioned dialogue. Aaron stood with one foot on the step.

"What you give--he? One franc?" asked the driver.

"A shilling," said Aaron.

"One sheeling. Yes. I know that. One sheeling English"--and the driver went off into impassioned exclamations in Torinese. The porter, still muttering and holding his hand as if the coin might sting him, filtered away.

"Orright. He know--sheeling--orright. English moneys, eh? Yes, he know. You get up, sir."

And away went Aaron, under the hood of the carriage, clattering down the wide darkness of Novara, over a bridge apparently, past huge rain-wet statues, and through more rainy, half-lit streets.

They stopped at last outside a sort of park wall with trees above. The big gates were just beyond.

"Sir William Franks--there." In a mixture of Italian and English the driver told Aaron to get down and ring the bell on the right. Aaron got down and in the darkness was able to read the name on the plate.

"How much?" said Aaron to the driver.

"Ten franc," said the fat driver.

But it was his turn now to screw down and scrutinise the pink ten-shilling note. He waved it in his hand.

"Not good, eh? Not good moneys?"

"Yes," said Aaron, rather indignantly. "Good English money. Ten shillings. Better than ten francs, a good deal. Better--better--"

"Good--you say? Ten sheeling--" The driver muttered and muttered, as if dissatisfied. But as a matter of fact he stowed the note in his

waistcoat pocket with considerable satisfaction, looked at Aaron curiously, and drove away.

Aaron stood there in the dark outside the big gates, and wished himself somewhere else. However, he rang the bell. There was a huge barking of dogs on the other side. Presently a light switched on, and a woman, followed by a man, appeared cautiously, in the half-opened doorway.

"Sir William Franks?" said Aaron.

"Si, signore."

And Aaron stepped with his two bags inside the gate. Huge dogs jumped round. He stood in the darkness under the trees at the foot of the park. The woman fastened the gate--Aaron saw a door--and through an uncurtained window a man writing at a desk--rather like the clerk in an hotel office. He was going with his two bags to the open door, when the woman stopped him, and began talking to him in Italian. It was evident he must not go on. So he put down the bags. The man stood a few yards away, watchfully.

Aaron looked down at the woman and tried to make out something of what she was saying, but could not. The dogs still barked spasmodically, drops fell from the tall, dark trees that rose overhead.

"Is Mr. Lilly here? Mr. Lilly?" he asked.

"Signor Lillee. No, Signore--"

And off the woman went in Italian. But it was evident Lilly was not at the house. Aaron wished more than ever he had not come, but had gone to an hotel.

He made out that the woman was asking him for his name--"Meester--? Meester--?" she kept saying, with a note of interrogation.

"Sisson. Mr. Sisson," said Aaron, who was becoming impatient. And he found a visiting card to give her. She seemed appeased--said something about telephone--and left him standing.

The rain had ceased, but big drops were shaken from the dark, high trees. Through the uncurtained window he saw the man at the desk reach the telephone. There was a long pause. At length the woman came back and motioned to him to go up--up the drive which curved and disappeared under the dark trees.

"Go up there?" said Aaron, pointing.

That was evidently the intention. So he picked up his bags and strode forward, from out of the circle of electric light, up the curved drive in the darkness. It was a steep incline. He saw trees and the grass slopes. There was a tang of snow in the air.

Suddenly, up ahead, a brilliant light switched on. He continued uphill through the trees along the path, towards it, and at length, emerged at the foot of a great flight of steps, above which was a wide glass entrance, and an Italian manservant in white gloves hovering as if on the brink.

Aaron emerged from the drive and climbed the steps. The manservant came down two steps and took the little bag. Then he ushered Aaron and the big bag into a large, pillared hall, with thick Turkish carpet on the floor, and handsome appointments. It was spacious, comfortable and warm; but somewhat pretentious; rather like the imposing hall into which the heroine suddenly enters on the film.

Aaron dropped his heavy bag, with relief, and stood there, hat in hand, in his damp overcoat in the circle of light, looking vaguely at the yellow marble pillars, the gilded arches above, the shadowy distances and the great stairs. The butler disappeared--reappeared in another moment--and through an open doorway came the host. Sir William was a small, clean old man with a thin, white beard and a courtly deportment, wearing a black velvet dinner jacket faced with purple silk.

"How do you do, Mr. Sisson. You come straight from England?"

Sir William held out his hand courteously and benevolently, smiling an old man's smile of hospitality.

"Mr. Lilly has gone away?" said Aaron.

"Yes. He left us several days ago."

Aaron hesitated.

"You didn't expect me, then?"

"Yes, oh, yes. Yes, oh, yes. Very glad to see you--well, now, come in and have some dinner--"

At this moment Lady Franks appeared--short, rather plump, but erect and definite, in a black silk dress and pearls round her throat.

"How do you do? We are just at dinner," she said. "You haven't eaten? No--well, then--would you like a bath now, or--?"

It was evident the Franks had dispensed much hospitality: much of it charitable. Aaron felt it.

"No," he said. "I'll wash my hands and come straight in, shall I?"

"Yes, perhaps that would be better--"

"I'm afraid I am a nuisance."

"Not at all--Beppe--" and she gave instructions in Italian.

Another footman appeared, and took the big bag. Aaron took the little one this time. They climbed the broad, turning stairs, crossed another handsome lounge, gilt and ormolu and yellow silk chairs and scattered copies of The Graphic or of Country Life, then they disappeared through a doorway into a much narrower flight of stairs. Man can so rarely keep it up all the way, the grandeur.

Two black and white chamber-maids appeared. Aaron found himself in a blue silk bedroom, and a footman unstrapping his bag, which he did not want unstrapped. Next minute he was beckoned and allured by the Italian servants down the corridor, and presented to the handsome, spacious bathroom, which was warm and creamy-coloured and glittering with massive silver and mysterious with up-to-date conveniences. There he was left to his own devices, and felt like a small boy finding out how it works. For even the mere turning on of the taps was a problem in silver mechanics.

In spite of all the splendours and the elaborated convenience, he washed himself in good hot water, and wished he were having a bath, chiefly because of the wardrobe of marvellous Turkish towels. Then he clicked his way back to his bedroom, changed his shirt and combed his hair in the blue silk bedroom with the Greuze picture, and felt a little dim and superficial surprise. He had fallen into country house parties before, but never into quite such a plushy sense of riches. He felt he ought to

have his breath taken away. But alas, the cinema has taken our breath away so often, investing us in all the splendours of the splendidest American millionaire, or all the heroics and marvels of the Somme or the North Pole, that life has now no magnate richer than we, no hero nobler than we have been, on the film. Connu! Connu! Everything life has to offer is known to us, couldn't be known better, from the film.

So Aaron tied his tie in front of a big Venice mirror, and nothing was a surprise to him. He found a footman hovering to escort him to the dining-room--a real Italian footman, uneasy because milady's dinner was unsettled. He entered the rather small dining-room, and saw the people at table.

He was told various names: bowed to a young, slim woman with big blue eyes and dark hair like a photograph, then to a smaller rather colourless young woman with a large nose: then to a stout, rubicund, bald colonel, and to a tall, thin, Oxford-looking major with a black patch over his eye--both these men in khaki: finally to a good-looking, well-nourished young man in a dinner-jacket, and he sat down to his soup, on his hostess' left hand. The colonel sat on her right, and was confidential. Little Sir William, with his hair and his beard white like spun glass, his manner very courteous and animated, the purple facings of his velvet jacket very impressive, sat at the far end of the table jesting with the ladies and showing his teeth in an old man's smile, a little bit affected, but pleasant, wishing everybody to be happy.

Aaron ate his soup, trying to catch up. Milady's own confidential Italian butler, fidelity itself, hovered quivering near, spiritually helping the newcomer to catch up. Two nice little entree dishes, specially prepared for Aaron to take the place of the bygone fish and vol au-vents of the proper dinner, testified to the courtesy and charity of his hostess.

Well, eating rapidly, he had more or less caught up by the time the sweets came. So he swallowed a glass of wine and looked round. His hostess with her pearls, and her diamond star in her grey hair, was speaking of Lilly and then of music to him.

"I hear you are a musician. That's what I should have been if I had had my way."

"What instrument?" asked Aaron.

"Oh, the piano. Yours is the flute, Mr. Lilly says. I think the flute can be so attractive. But I feel, of course you have more range with the piano. I love the piano--and orchestra."

At that moment, the colonel and hostess-duties distracted her. But she came back in snatches. She was a woman who reminded him a little of Queen Victoria; so assured in her own room, a large part of her attention always given to the successful issue of her duties, the remainder at the disposal of her guests. It was an old-fashioned, not

unpleasant feeling: like retrospect. But she had beautiful, big, smooth emeralds and sapphires on her fingers. Money! What a curious thing it is! Aaron noticed the deference of all the guests at table: a touch of obsequiousness: before the money! And the host and hostess accepted the deference, nay, expected it, as their due. Yet both Sir William and Lady Franks knew that it was only money and success. They had both a certain afterthought, knowing dimly that the game was but a game, and that they were the helpless leaders in the game. They had a certain basic ordinariness which prevented their making any great hits, and which kept them disillusioned all the while. They remembered their poor and insignificant days.

"And I hear you were playing in the orchestra at Covent Garden. We came back from London last week. I enjoyed Beecham's operas so much."

"Which do you like best?" said Aaron.

"Oh, the Russian. I think Ivan. It is such fine music."

"I find Ivan artificial."

"Do you? Oh, I don't think so. No, I don't think you can say that."

Aaron wondered at her assurance. She seemed to put him just a tiny bit in his place, even in an opinion on music. Money gave her that right, too. Curious--the only authority left. And he deferred to her opinion:

that is, to her money. He did it almost deliberately. Yes--what did he believe in, besides money? What does any man? He looked at the black patch over the major's eye. What had he given his eye for?--the nation's money. Well, and very necessary, too; otherwise we might be where the wretched Austrians are. Instead of which--how smooth his hostess' sapphires!

"Of course I myself prefer Moussorgsky," said Aaron. "I think he is a greater artist. But perhaps it is just personal preference."

"Yes. Boris is wonderful. Oh, some of the scenes in Boris!"

"And even more Kovantchina," said Aaron. "I wish we could go back to melody pure and simple. Yet I find Kovantchina, which is all mass music practically, gives me more satisfaction than any other opera."

"Do you really? I shouldn't say so: oh, no--but you can't mean that you would like all music to go back to melody pure and simple! Just a flute--just a pipe! Oh, Mr. Sisson, you are bigoted for your instrument. I just LIVE in harmony--chords, chords!" She struck imaginary chords on the white damask, and her sapphires swam blue. But at the same time she was watching to see if Sir William had still got beside his plate the white medicine cachet which he must swallow at every meal. Because if so, she must remind him to swallow it. However, at that very moment, he put it on his tongue. So that she could turn her attention again to Aaron and the imaginary chord on the white damask; the thing she just

lived in. But the rubicund bald colonel, more rubicund after wine, most rubicund now the Marsala was going, snatched her attention with a burly homage to her femininity, and shared his fear with her with a boyish gallantry.

When the women had gone up, Sir William came near and put his hand on Aaron's shoulder. It was evident the charm was beginning to work. Sir William was a self-made man, and not in the least a snob. He liked the fundamental ordinariness in Aaron, the commonness of the common man.

"Well now, Mr. Sisson, we are very glad to see you! Very glad, indeed. I count Mr. Lilly one of the most interesting men it has ever been my good fortune to know. And so for your own sake, and for Mr. Lilly's sake, we are very glad to see you. Arthur, my boy, give Mr. Sisson some Marsala--and take some yourself."

"Thank you, Sir," said the well-nourished young man in nice evening clothes. "You'll take another glass yourself, Sir?"

"Yes, I will, I will. I will drink a glass with Mr. Sisson. Major, where are you wandering off to? Come and take a glass with us, my boy."

"Thanks, Sir William," drawled the young major with the black patch.

"Now, Colonel--I hope you are in good health and spirits."

"Never better, Sir William, never better."

"I'm very glad to hear it; very glad indeed. Try my Marsala--I think it is quite good. Port is beyond us for the moment--for the moment--"

And the old man sipped his brown wine, and smiled again. He made quite a handsome picture: but he was frail.

"And where are you bound, Mr. Sisson? Towards Rome?"

"I came to meet Lilly," said Aaron.

"Ah! But Lilly has fled over the borders by this time. Never was such a man for crossing frontiers. Wonderful person, to be able to do it."

"Where has he gone?" said Aaron.

"I think to Geneva for the moment. But he certainly talked of Venice. You yourself have no definite goal?"

"No."

"Ah! You have not come to Italy to practice your art?"

"I shall HAVE to practice it: or else--no, I haven't come for that."

"Ah, you will HAVE to practice it. Ah, yes! We are all under the necessity to eat. And you have a family in England? Am I not right?"

"Quite. I've got a family depending on me."

"Yes, then you must practice your art: you must practice your art. Well--shall we join the ladies? Coffee will no doubt be served."

"Will you take my arm, Sir?" said the well-nourished Arthur.

"Thank you, thank you," the old man motioned him away.

So they went upstairs to where the three women were sitting in the library round the fire, chattering not very interested. The entry of Sir William at once made a stir.

The girl in white, with the biggish nose, fluttered round him. She was Arthur's wife. The girl in soft blue spread herself on the couch: she was the young Major's wife, and she had a blue band round her hair. The Colonel hovered stout and fidgetty round Lady Franks and the liqueur stand. He and the Major were both in khaki--belonging to the service on duty in Italy still.

Coffee appeared--and Sir William doled out creme de menthe. There was no conversation--only tedious words. The little party was just commonplace and dull--boring. Yet Sir William, the self-made man, was a

study. And the young, Oxford-like Major, with his English diffidence and his one dark, pensive, baffled eye was only waiting to be earnest, poor devil.

The girl in white had been a sort of companion to Lady Franks, so that Arthur was more or less a son-in-law. In this capacity, he acted. Aaron strayed round uneasily looking at the books, bought but not read, and at the big pictures above. It was Arthur who fetched out the little boxes containing the orders conferred on Sir William for his war-work: and perhaps more, for the many thousands of pounds he had spent on his war-work.

There were three orders: one British, and quite important, a large silver star for the breast: one Italian, smaller, and silver and gold; and one from the State of Ruritania, in silver and red-and-green enamel, smaller than the others.

"Come now, William," said Lady Franks, "you must try them all on. You must try them all on together, and let us see how you look."

The little, frail old man, with his strange old man's blue eyes and his old man's perpetual laugh, swelled out his chest and said:

"What, am I to appear in all my vanities?" And he laughed shortly.

"Of course you are. We want to see you," said the white girl.

"Indeed we do! We shouldn't mind all appearing in such vanities--what, Lady Franks!" boomed the Colonel.

"I should think not," replied his hostess. "When a man has honours conferred on him, it shows a poor spirit if he isn't proud of them."

"Of course I am proud of them!" said Sir William. "Well then, come and have them pinned on. I think it's wonderful to have got so much in one life-time--wonderful," said Lady Franks.

"Oh, Sir William is a wonderful man," said the Colonel. "Well--we won't say so before him. But let us look at him in his orders."

Arthur, always ready on these occasions, had taken the large and shining British star from its box, and drew near to Sir William, who stood swelling his chest, pleased, proud, and a little wistful.

"This one first, Sir," said Arthur.

Sir William stood very still, half tremulous, like a man undergoing an operation.

"And it goes just here--the level of the heart. This is where it goes." And carefully he pinned the large, radiating ornament on the black velvet dinner-jacket of the old man.

"That is the first--and very becoming," said Lady Franks.

"Oh, very becoming! Very becoming!" said the tall wife of the Major--she was a handsome young woman of the tall, frail type.

"Do you think so, my dear?" said the old man, with his eternal smile: the curious smile of old people when they are dead.

"Not only becoming, Sir," said the Major, bending his tall, slim figure forwards. "But a reassuring sign that a nation knows how to distinguish her valuable men."

"Quite!" said Lady Franks. "I think it is a very great honour to have got it. The king was most gracious, too-- Now the other. That goes beside it--the Italian--"

Sir William stood there undergoing the operation of the pinning-on. The Italian star being somewhat smaller than the British, there was a slight question as to where exactly it should be placed. However, Arthur decided it: and the old man stood before the company with his two stars on his breast.

"And now the Ruritanian," said Lady Franks eagerly.

"That doesn't go on the same level with the others, Lady Franks," said

Arthur. "That goes much lower down--about here."

"Are you sure?" said Lady Franks. "Doesn't it go more here?"

"No no, no no, not at all. Here! Isn't it so, Sybil?"

"Yes, I think so," said Sybil.

Old Sir William stood quite silent, his breast prepared, peering over the facings of his coat to see where the star was going. The Colonel was called in, and though he knew nothing about it, he agreed with Arthur, who apparently did know something. So the star was pinned quite low down. Sir William, peeping down, exclaimed:

"Well, that is most curious now! I wear an order over the pit of my stomach! I think that is very curious: a curious place to wear an order."

"Stand up! Stand up and let us look!" said Lady Franks. "There now, isn't it handsome? And isn't it a great deal of honour for one man? Could he have expected so much, in one life-time? I call it wonderful. Come and look at yourself, dear"--and she led him to a mirror.

"What's more, all thoroughly deserved," said Arthur.

"I should think so," said the Colonel, fidgetting.

"Ah, yes, nobody has deserved them better," cooed Sybil.

"Nor on more humane and generous grounds," said the Major, sotto voce.

"The effort to save life, indeed," returned the Major's young wife: "splendid!"

Sir William stood naively before the mirror and looked at his three stars on his black velvet dinner-jacket.

"Almost directly over the pit of my stomach," he said. "I hope that is not a decoration for my greedy APPETITE." And he laughed at the young women.

"I assure you it is in position, Sir," said Arthur. "Absolutely correct. I will read it out to you later."

"Aren't you satisfied? Aren't you a proud man! Isn't it wonderful?" said Lady Franks. "Why, what more could a man want from life? He could never EXPECT so much."

"Yes, my dear. I AM a proud man. Three countries have honoured me--" There was a little, breathless pause.

"And not more than they ought to have done," said Sybil.

"Well! Well! I shall have my head turned. Let me return to my own humble self. I am too much in the stars at the moment."

Sir William turned to Arthur to have his decorations removed. Aaron, standing in the background, felt the whole scene strange, childish, a little touching. And Lady Franks was so obviously trying to console her husband: to console the frail, excitable old man with his honours. But why console him? Did he need consolation? And did she? It was evident that only the hard-money woman in her put any price on the decorations.

Aaron came forward and examined the orders, one after the other. Just metal playthings of curious shiny silver and gilt and enamel. Heavy the British one--but only like some heavy buckle, a piece of metal merely when one turned it over. Somebody dropped the Italian cross, and there was a moment of horror. But the lump of metal took no hurt. Queer to see the things stowed in their boxes again. Aaron had always imagined these mysterious decorations as shining by nature on the breasts of heroes. Pinned-on pieces of metal were a considerable come-down.

The orders were put away, the party sat round the fire in the comfortable library, the men sipping more creme de menthe, since nothing else offered, and the couple of hours in front promising the tedium of small-talk of tedious people who had really nothing to say and no particular originality in saying it.

Aaron, however, had reckoned without his host. Sir William sat upright in his chair, with all the determination of a frail old man who insists on being level with the young. The new guest sat in a lower chair, smoking, that curious glimmer on his face which made him so attractive, and which only meant that he was looking on the whole scene from the outside, as it were, from beyond a fence. Sir William came almost directly to the attack.

"And so, Mr. Sisson, you have no definite purpose in coming to Italy?"

"No, none," said Aaron. "I wanted to join Lilly."

"But when you had joined him--?"

"Oh, nothing--stay here a time, in this country, if I could earn my keep."

"Ah!--earn your keep? So you hope to earn your keep here? May I ask how?"

"By my flute."

"Italy is a poor country."

"I don't want much."

"You have a family to provide for."

"They are provided for--for a couple of years."

"Oh, indeed! Is that so?"

The old man got out of Aaron the detailed account of his circumstances--how he had left so much money to be paid over to his wife, and had received only a small amount for himself.

"I see you are like Lilly--you trust to Providence," said Sir William.

"Providence or fate," said Aaron.

"Lilly calls it Providence," said Sir William. "For my own part, I always advise Providence plus a banking account. I have every belief in Providence, plus a banking account. Providence and no banking account I have observed to be almost invariably fatal. Lilly and I have argued it. He believes in casting his bread upon the waters. I sincerely hope he won't have to cast himself after his bread, one of these days. Providence with a banking account. Believe in Providence once you have secured enough to live on. I should consider it disastrous to believe in Providence BEFORE. One can never be SURE of Providence."

"What can you be sure of, then?" said Aaron.

"Well, in moderation, I can believe in a little hard cash, and in my own ability to earn a little hard cash."

"Perhaps Lilly believes in his own ability, too."

"No. Not so. Because he will never directly work to earn money. He works--and works quite well, I am told: but only as the spirit moves him, and never with any eye to the market. Now I call that TEMPTING Providence, myself. The spirit may move him in quite an opposite direction to the market--then where is Lilly? I have put it to him more than once."

"The spirit generally does move him dead against the market," said Aaron. "But he manages to scrape along."

"In a state of jeopardy: all the time in a state of jeopardy," said the old man. "His whole existence, and that of his wife, is completely precarious. I found, in my youth, the spirit moved me to various things which would have left me and my wife starving. So I realised in time, this was no good. I took my spirit in hand, therefore, and made him pull the cart which mankind is riding in. I harnessed him to the work of productive labour. And so he brought me my reward."

"Yes," said Aaron. "But every man according to his belief."

"I don't see," said Sir William, "how a man can BELIEVE in a Providence unless he sets himself definitely to the work of earning his daily bread, and making provision for future needs. That's what Providence means to me--making provision for oneself and one's family. Now, Mr. Lilly--and you yourself--you say you believe in a Providence that does NOT compel you to earn your daily bread, and make provision. I confess myself I cannot see it: and Lilly has never been able to convince me."

"I don't believe in a kind-hearted Providence," said Aaron, "and I don't believe Lilly does. But I believe in chance. I believe, if I go my own way, without tying my nose to a job, chance will always throw something in my way: enough to get along with."

"But on what do you base such a very unwarrantable belief?"

"I just feel like that."

"And if you are ever quite without success--and nothing to fall back on?"

"I can work at something."

"In case of illness, for example?"

"I can go to a hospital--or die."

"Dear me! However, you are more logical than Lilly. He seems to believe that he has the Invisible--call it Providence if you will--on his side, and that this Invisible will never leave him in the lurch, or let him down, so long as he sticks to his own side of the bargain, and NEVER works for his own ends. I don't quite see how he works. Certainly he seems to me a man who squanders a great deal of talent unworthily. Yet for some reason or other he calls this true, genuine activity, and has a contempt for actual work by which a man makes provision for his years and for his family. In the end, he will have to fall back on charity. But when I say so, he denies it, and says that in the end we, the men who work and make provision, will have to fall back on him. Well, all I can say is, that SO FAR he is in far greater danger of having to fall back on me, than I on him."

The old man sat back in his chair with a little laugh of triumph. But it smote almost devilishly on Aaron's ears, and for the first time in his life he felt that there existed a necessity for taking sides.

"I don't suppose he will do much falling back," he said.

"Well, he is young yet. You are both young. You are squandering your youth. I am an old man, and I see the end."

"What end, Sir William?"

"Charity--and poverty--and some not very congenial 'job,' as you call

it, to put bread in your mouth. No, no, I would not like to trust myself to your Providence, or to your Chance. Though I admit your Chance is a sounder proposition than Lilly's Providence. You speculate with your life and your talent. I admit the nature which is a born speculator. After all, with your flute, you will speculate in other people's taste for luxury, as a man may speculate in theatres or trains de luxe. You are the speculator. That may be your way of wisdom. But Lilly does not even speculate. I cannot see his point. I cannot see his point. I cannot see his point. Yet I have the greatest admiration for his mentality."

The old man had fired up during this conversation--and all the others in the room had gone silent. Lady Franks was palpably uneasy. She alone knew how frail the old man was--frailer by far than his years. She alone knew what fear of his own age, what fear of death haunted him now: fear of his own non-existence. His own old age was an agony to him; worse than an agony, a horror. He wanted to be young--to live, to live. And he was old, he was breaking up. The glistening youth of Aaron, the impetuousness of Lilly fascinated him. And both these men seemed calmly to contradict his own wealth and honours.

Lady Franks tried to turn off the conversation to the trickles of normal chit-chat. The Colonel was horribly bored--so were all the women--Arthur was indifferent. Only the young Major was implicated, troubled in his earnest and philosophic spirit.

"What I can't see," he said, "is the place that others have in your

scheme."

"Is isn't a scheme," said Aaron.

"Well then, your way of life. Isn't it pretty selfish, to marry a woman and then expect her to live on very little indeed, and that always precarious, just because you happen to believe in Providence or in Chance: which I think worse? What I don't see is where others come in. What would the world be like if everybody lived that way?"

"Other people can please themselves," said Aaron.

"No, they can't--because you take first choice, it seems to me. Supposing your wife--or Lilly's wife--asks for security and for provision, as Sir William says. Surely she has a right to it."

"If I've no right to it myself--and I HAVE no right to it, if I don't want it--then what right has she?"

"Every right, I should say. All the more since you are improvident."

"Then she must manage her rights for herself. It's no good her foisting her rights on to me."

"Isn't that pure selfishness?"

"It may be. I shall send my wife money as long as I've money to send."

"And supposing you have none?"

"Then I can't send it--and she must look out for herself."

"I call that almost criminal selfishness."

"I can't help it."

The conversation with the young Major broke off.

"It is certainly a good thing for society that men like you and Mr. Lilly are not common," said Sir William, laughing.

"Becoming commoner every day, you'll find," interjaculated the Colonel.

"Indeed! Indeed! Well. May we ask you another question, Mr. Sisson? I hope you don't object to our catechism?"

"No. Nor your judgment afterwards," said Aaron, grinning.

"Then upon what grounds did you abandon your family? I know it is a tender subject. But Lilly spoke of it to us, and as far I could see...."

"There were no grounds," said Aaron. "No, there weren't I just left them."

"Mere caprice?"

"If it's a caprice to be begotten--and a caprice to be born--and a caprice to die--then that was a caprice, for it was the same."

"Like birth or death? I don't follow."

"It happened to me: as birth happened to me once--and death will happen. It was a sort of death, too: or a sort of birth. But as undeniable as either. And without any more grounds."

The old, tremulous man, and the young man were watching one another.

"A natural event," said Sir William.

"A natural event," said Aaron.

"Not that you loved any other woman?"

"God save me from it."

"You just left off loving?"

"Not even that. I went away."

"What from?"

"From it all."

"From the woman in particular?"

"Oh, yes. Yes. Yes, that."

"And you couldn't go back?"

Aaron shook his head.

"Yet you can give no reasons?"

"Not any reasons that would be any good. It wasn't a question of reasons. It was a question of her and me and what must be. What makes a child be born out of its mother to the pain and trouble of both of them? I don't know."

"But that is a natural process."

"So is this--or nothing."

"No," interposed the Major. "Because birth is a universal process--and

yours is a specific, almost unique event."

"Well, unique or not, it so came about. I didn't ever leave off loving her--not as far as I know. I left her as I shall leave the earth when I die--because it has to be."

"Do you know what I think it is, Mr. Sisson?" put in Lady Franks. "I think you are just in a wicked state of mind: just that. Mr. Lilly, too. And you must be very careful, or some great misfortune will happen to you."

"It may," said Aaron.

"And it will, mark my word, it will."

"You almost wish it might, as a judgment on me," smiled Aaron.

"Oh, no, indeed. I should only be too sorry. But I feel it will, unless you are careful."

"I'll be careful, then."

"Yes, and you can't be too careful."

"You make me frightened."

"I would like to make you very frightened indeed, so that you went back humbly to your wife and family."

"It would HAVE to be a big fright then, I assure you."

"Ah, you are really heartless. It makes me angry."

She turned angrily aside.

"Well, well! Well, well! Life! Life! Young men are a new thing to me!" said Sir William, shaking his head. "Well, well! What do you say to whiskey and soda, Colonel?"

"Why, delighted, Sir William," said the Colonel, bouncing up.

"A night-cap, and then we retire," said Lady Franks.

Aaron sat thinking. He knew Sir William liked him: and that Lady Franks didn't. One day he might have to seek help from Sir William. So he had better placate milady. Wrinkling the fine, half mischievous smile on his face, and trading on his charm, he turned to his hostess.

"You wouldn't mind, Lady Franks, if I said nasty things about my wife and found a lot of fault with her. What makes you angry is that I know it is not a bit more her fault than mine, that we come apart. It can't be helped."

"Oh, yes, indeed. I disapprove of your way of looking at things altogether. It seems to me altogether cold and unmanly and inhuman. Thank goodness my experience of a man has been different."

"We can't all be alike, can we? And if I don't choose to let you see me crying, that doesn't prove I've never had a bad half hour, does it? I've had many--ay, and a many."

"Then why are you so WRONG, so wrong in your behaviour?"

"I suppose I've got to have my bout out: and when it's out, I can alter."

"Then I hope you've almost had your bout out," she said.

"So do I," said he, with a half-repentant, half-depressed look on his attractive face. The corners of his mouth grimaced slightly under his moustache.

"The best thing you can do is to go straight back to England, and to her."

"Perhaps I'd better ask her if she wants me, first," he said drily.

"Yes, you might do that, too." And Lady Franks felt she was quite

getting on with her work of reform, and the restoring of woman to her natural throne. Best not go too fast, either.

"Say when," shouted the Colonel, who was manipulating the syphon.

"When," said Aaron.

The men stood up to their drinks.

"Will you be leaving in the morning, Mr. Sisson?" asked Lady Franks.

"May I stay till Monday morning?" said Aaron. They were at Saturday evening.

"Certainly. And you will take breakfast in your room: we all do. At what time? Half past eight?"

"Thank you very much."

"Then at half past eight the man will bring it in. Goodnight."

Once more in his blue silk bedroom, Aaron grimaced to himself and stood in the middle of the room grimacing. His hostess' admonitions were like vitriol in his ears. He looked out of the window. Through the darkness of trees, the lights of a city below. Italy! The air was cold with snow.
He came back into his soft, warm room. Luxurious it was. And luxurious

the deep, warm bed.

He was still asleep when the man came noiselessly in with the tray: and it was morning. Aaron woke and sat up. He felt that the deep, warm bed, and the soft, warm room had made him sleep too well: robbed him of his night, like a narcotic. He preferred to be more uncomfortable and more aware of the flight of the dark hours. It seemed numbing.

The footman in his grey house-jacket was neat and Italian and sympathising. He gave good-morning in Italian--then softly arranged the little table by the bedside, and put out the toast and coffee and butter and boiled egg and honey, with silver and delicate china. Aaron watched the soft, catlike motions of the man. The dark eyes glanced once at the blond man, leaning on his elbow on the pillow. Aaron's face had that watchful, half-amused expression. The man said something in Italian. Aaron shook his head, laughed, and said:

"Tell me in English."

The man went softly to the window curtains, and motioned them with his hand.

"Yes, do," said Aaron.

So the man drew the buff-coloured silk curtains: and Aaron, sitting in bed, could see away beyond red roofs of a town, and in the further

heaven great snowy mountains.

"The Alps," he said in surprise.

"Gli Alpi--si, signore." The man bowed, gathered up Aaron's clothes, and silently retired.

Aaron watched through the window. It was a frosty morning at the end of September, with a clear blue morning-sky, Alpine, and the watchful, snow-streaked mountain tops bunched in the distance, as if waiting. There they were, hovering round, circling, waiting. They reminded him of marvellous striped sky-panthers circling round a great camp: the red-roofed city. Aaron looked, and looked again. In the near distance, under the house elm-tree tops were yellowing. He felt himself changing inside his skin.

So he turned away to his coffee and eggs. A little silver egg-cup with a curious little frill round it: honey in a frail, iridescent glass bowl, gold-iridescent: the charm of delicate and fine things. He smiled half mockingly to himself. Two instincts played in him: the one, an instinct for fine, delicate things: he had attractive hands; the other, an inclination to throw the dainty little table with all its niceties out of the window. It evoked a sort of devil in him.

He took his bath: the man had brought back his things: he dressed and went downstairs. No one in the lounge: he went down to the ground floor:

no one in the big hall with its pillars of yellow marble and its gold arches, its enormous, dark, bluey-red carpet. He stood before the great glass doors. Some red flowers still were blooming in the tubs, on the steps, handsome: and beautiful chrysanthemums in the wide portico. Beyond, yellow leaves were already falling on the green grass and the neat drive. Everywhere was silent and empty. He climbed the wide stairs, sat in the long, upper lounge where the papers were. He wanted his hat and coat, and did not know where to find them. The windows looked on to a terraced garden, the hill rising steeply behind the house. He wanted to go out.

So he opened more doors, and in a long drawing-room came upon five or six manservants, all in the grey house-jackets, all clean-shaven, neat, with neat black hair, all with dusters or brushes or feather brooms, and all frolicking, chattering, playing like so many monkeys. They were all of the same neat, smallish size. They were all laughing. They rolled back a great rug as if it were some football game, one flew at the curtains. And they merely looked at Aaron and went on chattering, and laughing and dusting.

Surprised, and feeling that he trespassed, he stood at the window a moment looking out. The noise went on behind him. So he turned, smiling, and asked for his hat, pointing to his head. They knew at once what he wanted. One of the fellows beckoned him away, down to the hall and to the long cupboard place where hats and coats and sticks were hung. There was his hat; he put it on, while the man chattered to him pleasantly and

unintelligibly, and opened for him the back door, into the garden.