CHAPTER XIII. WIE ES IHNEN GEFAELLT

The fresh morning air comes startling after a central heated house. So Aaron found it. He felt himself dashing up the steps into the garden like a bird dashing out of a trap where it has been caught: that warm and luxurious house. Heaven bless us, we who want to save civilisation. We had better make up our minds what of it we want to save. The kernel may be all well and good. But there is precious little kernel, to a lot of woolly stuffing and poisonous rind.

The gardens to Sir William's place were not imposing, and still rather war-neglected. But the pools of water lay smooth in the bright air, the flowers showed their colour beside the walks. Many birds dashed about, rather bewildered, having crossed the Alps in their migration southwards. Aaron noted with gratification a certain big magnificence, a certain reckless powerfulness in the still-blossoming, harsh-coloured, autumn flowers. Distinct satisfaction he derived from it.

He wandered upwards, up the succeeding flights of step; till he came to the upper rough hedge, and saw the wild copse on the hill-crest just above. Passing through a space in the hedge, he climbed the steep last bit of Sir William's lane. It was a little vineyard, with small vines and yellowing leaves. Everywhere the place looked neglected--but as if man had just begun to tackle it once more.

At the very top, by the wild hedge where spindle-berries hung pink, seats were placed, and from here the view was very beautiful. The hill dropped steep beneath him. A river wound on the near side of the city, crossed by a white bridge. The city lay close clustered, ruddy on the plains, glittering in the clear air with its flat roofs and domes and square towers, strangely naked-seeming in the clear, clean air. And massive in the further nearness, snow-streaked mountains, the tiger-like Alps. Tigers prowling between the north and the south. And this beautiful city lying nearest exposed. The snow-wind brushed her this morning like the icy whiskers of a tiger. And clear in the light lay Novara, wide, fearless, violent Novara. Beautiful the perfect air, the perfect and unblemished Alp-sky. And like the first southern flower, Novara.

Aaron sat watching in silence. Only the uneasy birds rustled. He watched the city and the winding river, the bridges, and the imminent Alps. He was on the south side. On the other side of the time barrier. His old, sleepy English nature was startled in its sleep. He felt like a man who knows it is time to wake up, and who doesn't want to wake up, to face the responsibility of another sort of day.

To open his darkest eyes and wake up to a new responsibility. Wake up and enter on the responsibility of a new self in himself. Ach, the horror of responsibility! He had all his life slept and shelved the burden. And he wanted to go on sleeping. It was so hateful to have to get a new grip on his own bowels, a new hard recklessness into his

heart, a new and responsible consciousness into his mind and soul. He felt some finger prodding, prodding, prodding him awake out of the sleep of pathos and tragedy and spasmodic passion, and he wriggled, unwilling, oh, most unwilling to undertake the new business.

In fact he ran away again. He gave a last look at the town and its white-fanged mountains, and descended through the garden, round the way of the kitchen garden and garage and stables and pecking chickens, back to the house again. In the hall still no one. He went upstairs to the long lounge. There sat the rubicund, bald, boy-like Colonel reading the Graphic. Aaron sat down opposite him, and made a feeble attempt at conversation. But the Colonel wasn't having any. It was evident he didn't care for the fellow--Mr. Aaron, that is. Aaron therefore dried up, and began to sit him out, with the aid of The Queen. Came a servant, however, and said that the Signor Colonello was called up from the hospital, on the telephone. The Colonel once departed, Aaron fled again, this time out of the front doors, and down the steep little park to the gates.

Huge dogs and little dogs came bounding forward. Out of the lodge came the woman with the keys, smiling very pleasantly this morning. So, he was in the street. The wide road led him inevitably to the big bridge, with the violent, physical stone statue-groups. Men and women were moving about, and he noticed for the first time the littleness and the momentaneousness of the Italians in the street. Perhaps it was the wideness of the bridge and the subsequent big, open boulevard. But there

it was: the people seemed little, upright brisk figures moving in a certain isolation, like tiny figures on a big stage. And he felt himself moving in the space between. All the northern cosiness gone. He was set down with a space round him.

Little trams flitted down the boulevard in the bright, sweet light. The barbers' shops were all busy, half the Novarese at that moment ambushed in lather, full in the public gaze. A shave is nothing if not a public act, in the south. At the little outdoor tables of the cafes a very few drinkers sat before empty coffee-cups. Most of the shops were shut. It was too soon after the war for life to be flowing very fast. The feeling of emptiness, of neglect, of lack of supplies was evident everywhere.

Aaron strolled on, surprised himself at his gallant feeling of liberty: a feeling of bravado and almost swaggering carelessness which is Italy's best gift to an Englishman. He had crossed the dividing line, and the values of life, though ostensibly and verbally the same, were dynamically different. Alas, however, the verbal and the ostensible, the accursed mechanical ideal gains day by day over the spontaneous life-dynamic, so that Italy becomes as idea-bound and as automatic as England: just a business proposition.

Coming to the station, he went inside. There he saw a money-changing window which was open, so he planked down a five-pound note and got two-hundred-and-ten lire. Here was a start. At a bookstall he saw a man buy a big timetable with a large railway map in it. He immediately

bought the same. Then he retired to a corner to get his whereabouts.

In the morning he must move: where? He looked on the map. The map seemed to offer two alternatives, Milan and Genoa. He chose Milan, because of its musical associations and its cathedral. Milano then. Strolling and still strolling, he found the boards announcing Arrivals and Departures. As far as he could make out, the train for Milan left at 9:00 in the morning.

So much achieved, he left the big desolating caravanserai of the station. Soldiers were camped in every corner, lying in heaps asleep. In their grey-green uniform, he was surprised at their sturdy limbs and uniformly short stature. For the first time, he saw the cock-feathers of the Bersaglieri. There seemed a new life-quality everywhere. Many worlds, not one world. But alas, the one world triumphing more and more over the many worlds, the big oneness swallowing up the many small diversities in its insatiable gnawing appetite, leaving a dreary sameness throughout the world, that means at last complete sterility.

Aaron, however, was too new to the strangeness, he had no eye for the horrible sameness that was spreading like a disease over Italy from England and the north. He plunged into the space in front of the station, and took a new, wide boulevard. To his surprise he ran towards a big and over-animated statue that stood resolutely with its back to the magnificent snow-domes of the wild Alps. Wolves in the street could not have startled him more than those magnificent fierce-gleaming

mountains of snow at the street-end, beyond the statue. He stood and wondered, and never thought to look who the gentleman was. Then he turned right round, and began to walk home.

Luncheon was at one o'clock. It was half-past twelve when he rang at the lodge gates. He climbed through the leaves of the little park, on a side-path, rather reluctantly towards the house. In the hall Lady Franks was discussing with Arthur a fat Pekinese who did not seem very well. She was sure the servants did not obey her orders concerning the Pekinese bitch. Arthur, who was more than indifferent, assured her they did. But she seemed to think that the whole of the male human race was in league against the miserable specimen of a she-dog. She almost cried, thinking her Queenie might by some chance meet with, perhaps, a harsh word or look. Queenie apparently fattened on the secret detestation of the male human species.

"I can't bear to think that a dumb creature might be ill-treated," she said to Aaron. "Thank goodness the Italians are better than they used to be."

"Are they better than they used to be?"

"Oh, much. They have learnt it from us."

She then enquired if her guest had slept, and if he were rested from his journey. Aaron, into whose face the faint snow-wind and the sun had

brought a glow, replied that he had slept well and enjoyed the morning, thank you. Whereupon Lady Franks knitted her brows and said Sir William had had such a bad night. He had not been able to sleep, and had got up and walked about the room. The least excitement, and she dreaded a break-down. He must have absolute calm and restfulness.

"There's one for you and your jawing last night, Aaron, my boy!" said our hero to himself.

"I thought Sir William seemed so full of life and energy," he said, aloud.

"Ah, did you! No, he WANTS to be. But he can't do it. He's very much upset this morning. I have been very anxious about him."

"I am sorry to hear that."

Lady Franks departed to some duty. Aaron sat alone before the fire. It was a huge fireplace, like a dark chamber shut in by tall, finely-wrought iron gates. Behind these iron gates of curly iron the logs burned and flickered like leopards slumbering and lifting their heads within their cage. Aaron wondered who was the keeper of the savage element, who it was that would open the iron grille and throw on another log, like meat to the lions. To be sure the fire was only to be looked at: like wild beasts in the Zoo. For the house was warm from roof to floor. It was strange to see the blue air of sunlight outside, the

yellow-edged leaves falling in the wind, the red flowers shaking.

The gong sounded softly through the house. The Colonel came in heartily from the garden, but did not speak to Aaron. The Major and his wife came pallid down the stairs. Lady Franks appeared, talking domestic-secretarial business with the wife of Arthur. Arthur, well-nourished and half at home, called down the stairs. And then Sir William descended, old and frail now in the morning, shaken: still he approached Aaron heartily, and asked him how he did, and how he had spent his morning. The old man who had made a fortune: how he expected homage: and how he got it! Homage, like most things, is just a convention and a social trick. Aaron found himself paying homage, too, to the old man who had made a fortune. But also, exacting a certain deference in return, from the old man who had made a fortune. Getting it, too. On what grounds? Youth, maybe. But mostly, scorn for fortunes and fortune-making. Did he scorn fortunes and fortune-making? Not he, otherwise whence this homage for the old man with much money? Aaron, like everybody else, was rather paralysed by a million sterling, personified in one old man. Paralysed, fascinated, overcome. All those three. Only having no final control over his own make-up, he could not drive himself into the money-making or even into the money-having habit. And he had just wit enough to threaten Sir William's golden king with his own ivory queen and knights of wilful life. And Sir William quaked.

"Well, and how have you spent your morning?" asked the host.

"I went first to look at the garden."

"Ah, not much to see now. They have been beautiful with flowers, once. But for two and a half years the house has been a hospital for officers--and even tents in the park and garden--as many as two hundred wounded and sick at a time. We are only just returning to civil life. And flowers need time. Yes--yes--British officers--for two and a half years. But did you go up, now, to the belvedere?"

"To the top--where the vines are? I never expected the mountains."

"You never expected the mountains? Pray, why not? They are always there!"

"But I was never there before. I never knew they were there, round the town. I didn't expect it like that."

"Ah! So you found our city impressive?"

"Very! Ah, very! A new world to me. I feel I've come out of myself."

"Yes, it is a wonderful sight--a wonderful sight-- But you have not been INTO the town?"

"Yes. I saw the men being shaved, and all the soldiers at the station: and a statue, and mountains behind it. Oh, I've had a full morning."

"A full morning! That is good, that is good!" The old man looked again at the younger man, and seemed to get life from him, to live in him vicariously.

"Come," said the hostess. "Luncheon."

Aaron sat again on his hostess' left hand. The Colonel was more affable now it was meal-time. Sir William was again in a good humour, chaffing the young ladies with an old man's gallantry. But now he insisted on drawing Aaron into the play. And Aaron did not want to be drawn. He did not one bit want to chaffer gallantries with the young women. Between him and Sir William there was a curious rivalry--unconscious on both sides. The old knight had devoted an energetic, adventurous, almost an artistic nature to the making of his fortune and the developing of later philanthropies. He had no children. Aaron was devoting a similar nature to anything but fortune-making and philanthropy. The one held life to be a storing-up of produce and a conservation of energy: the other held life to be a sheer spending of energy and a storing-up of nothing but experience. There they were, in opposition, the old man and the young. Sir William kept calling Aaron into the chaffer at the other end of the table: and Aaron kept on refusing to join. He hated long distance answers, anyhow. And in his mood of the moment he hated the young women. He had a conversation with Arthur about statues: concerning which Aaron knew nothing, and Arthur less than nothing. Then Lady Franks turned the conversation to the soldiers at the station, and said how Sir William

had equipped rest-huts for the Italian privates, near the station: but that such was the jealousy and spite of the Italian Red Cross--or some such body, locally--that Sir William's huts had been left empty--standing unused--while the men had slept on the stone floor of the station, night after night, in icy winter. There was evidently much bitter feeling as a result of Sir William's philanthropy. Apparently even the honey of lavish charity had turned to gall in the Italian mouth: at least the official mouth. Which gall had been spat back at the charitable, much to his pain. It is in truth a difficult world, particularly when you have another race to deal with. After which came the beef-olives.

"Oh," said Lady Franks, "I had such a dreadful dream last night, such a dreadful dream. It upset me so much. I have not been able to get over it all day."

"What was it?" said Aaron. "Tell it, and break it."

"Why," said his hostess, "I dreamed I was asleep in my room--just as I actually was--and that it was night, yet with a terrible sort of light, like the dead light before dawn, so that one could see. And my maid Giuseppina came running into my room, saying: 'Signora! Signora! Si alza! Subito! Signora! Vengono su!'--and I said, 'Chi? Chi sono chi vengono? Chi?'--'I Novaresi! I Novaresi vengono su. Vengono qui!'--I got out of bed and went to the window. And there they were, in the dead light, rushing up to the house, through the trees. It was so awful, I

haven't been able to forget it all day."

"Tell me what the words are in English," said Aaron.

"Why," she said, "get up, get up--the Novaresi, the people of Novara are coming up--vengono su--they are coming up--the Novara people--work-people. I can't forget it. It was so real, I can't believe it didn't actually happen."

"Ah," said Aaron. "It will never happen. I know, that whatever one foresees, and FEELS has happened, never happens in real life. It sort of works itself off through the imagining of it."

"Well, it was almost more real to me than real life," said his hostess.

"Then it will never happen in real life," he said.

Luncheon passed, and coffee. The party began to disperse--Lady Franks to answer more letters, with the aid of Arthur's wife--some to sleep, some to walk. Aaron escaped once more through the big gates. This time he turned his back on the town and the mountains, and climbed up the hill into the country. So he went between the banks and the bushes, watching for unknown plants and shrubs, hearing the birds, feeling the influence of a new soil. At the top of the hill he saw over into vineyards, and a new strange valley with a winding river, and jumbled, entangled hills. Strange wild country so near the town. It seemed to keep an almost

virgin wildness--yet he saw the white houses dotted here and there.

Just below him was a peasant house: and on a little loggia in the sun two peasants in white shirtsleeves and black Sunday suits were sitting drinking wine, and talking, talking. Peasant youths in black hats, their sweethearts in dark stuff dresses, wearing no hat, but a black silk or a white silk scarf, passed slowly along the little road just below the ridge. None looked up to see Aaron sitting there alone. From some hidden place somebody was playing an accordion, a jerky sound in the still afternoon. And away beyond lay the unchanging, mysterious valley, and the infolding, mysterious hills of Italy.

Returning back again another way, he lost himself at the foot of the hill in new and deserted suburb streets--unfinished streets of seemingly unfinished houses. Then a sort of boulevard where bourgeois families were taking the Sunday afternoon walk: stout papas, stout, pallid mamas in rather cheap black fur, little girls very much dressed, and long lads in short socks and round sailor caps, ribbons fluttering. Alien they felt, alien, alien, as a bourgeois crowd always does, but particularly a foreign, Sunday-best bourgeois crowd. Aaron wandered and wandered, finding the tram terminus and trying blank, unfinished street after street. He had a great disinclination to ask his way.

At last he recognised the bank and the little stream of water that ran along the street side. So he was back in time for tea. A hospital nurse was there, and two other strange women. Arthur played the part of host.

Sir William came in from a walk with the dogs, but retired to his room without taking tea.

And so the evening fell. Aaron sat in the hall at some distance from the fire, which burned behind its wrought iron gates. He was tired now with all his impressions, and dispirited. He thought of his wife and children at home: of the church-bells ringing so loudly across the field beyond his garden end: of the dark-clad people trailing unevenly across the two paths, one to the left, one to the right, forking their way towards the houses of the town, to church or to chapel: mostly to chapel. At this hour he himself would be dressed in his best clothes, tying his bow, ready to go out to the public house. And his wife would be resenting his holiday departure, whilst she was left fastened to the children.

Rather tired and dispirited in this alien place, he wondered if he wished himself back. But the moment he actually realised himself at home, and felt the tension of barrenness which it meant, felt the curious and deadly opposition of his wife's will against his own nature, the almost nauseating ache which it amounted to, he pulled himself together and rejoiced again in his new surroundings. Her will, her will, her terrible, implacable, cunning will! What was there in the female will so diabolical, he asked himself, that it could press like a flat sheet of iron against a man all the time? The female will! He realised now that he had a horror of it. It was flat and inflexible as a sheet of iron. But also it was cunning as a snake that could sing treacherous songs.

Of two people at a deadlock, he always reminded himself, there is not one only wholly at fault. Both must be at fault. Having a detached and logical soul, he never let himself forget this truth. Take Lottie! He had loved her. He had never loved any other woman. If he had had his other affairs--it was out of spite or defiance or curiosity. They meant nothing. He and Lottie had loved one another. And the love had developed almost at once into a kind of combat. Lottie had been the only child of headstrong, well-to-do parents. He also had been the only child of his widowed mother. Well then, both he and Lottie had been brought up to consider themselves the first in whatsoever company they found themselves. During the early months of the marriage he had, of course, continued the spoiling of the young wife. But this never altered the fact that, by his very nature, he considered himself as first and almost as single in any relationship. First and single he felt, and as such he bore himself. It had taken him years to realise that Lottie also felt herself first and single: under all her whimsicalness and fretfulness was a conviction as firm as steel: that she, as woman, was the centre of creation, the man was but an adjunct. She, as woman, and particularly as mother, was the first great source of life and being, and also of culture. The man was but the instrument and the finisher. She was the source and the substance.

Sure enough, Lottie had never formulated this belief inside herself. But it was formulated for her in the whole world. It is the substantial and professed belief of the whole white world. She did but inevitably

represent what the whole world around her asserted: the life-centrality of woman. Woman, the life-bearer, the life-source.

Nearly all men agree to the assertion. Practically all men, even while demanding their selfish rights as superior males, tacitly agree to the fact of the sacred life-bearing priority of woman. Tacitly, they yield the worship to that which is female. Tacitly, they conspire to agree that all that is productive, all that is fine and sensitive and most essentially noble, is woman. This, in their productive and religious souls, they believe. And however much they may react against the belief, loathing their women, running to prostitutes, or beer or anything, out of reaction against this great and ignominious dogma of the sacred priority of women, still they do but profane the god they worship. Profaning woman, they still inversely worship her.

But in Aaron was planted another seed. He did not know it. He started off on the good old tack of worshipping his woman while his heart was honest, and profaning her in his fits of temper and revolt. But he made a bad show. Born in him was a spirit which could not worship woman: no, and would not. Could not and would not. It was not in him. In early days, he tried to pretend it was in him. But through his plaintive and homage-rendering love of a young husband was always, for the woman, discernible the arrogance of self-unyielding male. He never yielded himself: never. All his mad loving was only an effort. Afterwards, he was as devilishly unyielded as ever. And it was an instinct in her, that her man must yield to her, so that she should envelop him yielding,

in her all-beneficent love. She was quite sure that her love was all-beneficent. Of this no shadow of doubt. She was quite sure that the highest her man could ever know or ever reach, was to be perfectly enveloped in her all-beneficent love. This was her idea of marriage. She held it not as an idea, but as a profound impulse and instinct: an instinct developed in her by the age in which she lived. All that was deepest and most sacred in he feeling centred in this belief.

And he outraged her! Oh, from the first day and the first night, she felt he outraged her. True, for some time she had been taken in by his manifest love. But though you can deceive the conscious mind, you can never deceive the deep, unconscious instinct. She could never understand whence arose in her, almost from the first days of marriage with him, her terrible paroxysms of hatred for him. She was in love with him: ah, heaven, how maddeningly she was in love with him: a certain unseizable beauty that was his, and which fascinated her as a snake a bird. But in revulsion, how she hated him! How she abhorred him! How she despised and shuddered at him! He seemed a horrible thing to her.

And then again, oh, God, the agony of her desire for him. The agony of her long, long desire for him. He was a passionate lover. He gave her, ostensibly, all she asked for. He withheld from her nothing, no experience, no degree of intimacy. She was his initiate, or he hers.

And yet, oh, horror for a woman, he withheld everything from her. He withheld the very centre of himself. For a long time, she never

realised. She was dazed and maddened only. But as months of married experience passed into years of married torment, she began to understand. It was that, after their most tremendous, and, it seemed to her, heaven-rending passion--yea, when for her every veil seemed rent and a terrible and sacred creative darkness covered the earth--then--after all this wonder and miracle--in crept a poisonous grey snake of disillusionment, a poisonous grey snake of disillusion that bit her to madness, so that she really was a mad woman, demented.

Why? Why? He never gave himself. He never came to her, really. He withheld himself. Yes, in those supreme and sacred times which for her were the whole culmination of life and being, the ecstasy of unspeakable passional conjunction, he was not really hers. He was withheld. He withheld the central core of himself, like the devil and hell-fiend he was. He cheated and made play with her tremendous passional soul, her sacred sex passion, most sacred of all things for a woman. All the time, some central part of him stood apart from her, aside, looking on.

Oh, agony and horror for a passionate, fierce-hearted woman! She who loved him. She who loved him to madness. She who would have died for him. She who did die with him, many terrible and magnificent connubial deaths, in his arms, her husband.

Her husband! How bitter the word grew to her! Her husband! and him never once given, given wholly to her! Her husband--and in all the frenzied finality of desire, she never fully possessed him, not once. No, not

once. As time went on, she learned it for inevitable. Not once!

And then, how she hated him! Cheated, foiled, betrayed, forced to love him or to hate him: never able to be at peace near him nor away from him: poor Lottie, no wonder she was as a mad woman. She was strictly as a woman demented, after the birth of her second child. For all her instinct, all her impulse, all her desire, and above all, all her will, was to possess her man in very fulness once: just once: and once and for all. Once, just once: and it would be once and for all.

But never! Never! Not once! Never! Not for one single solitary second! Was it not enough to send a woman mad! Was it not enough to make her demented! Yes, and mad she was. She made his life a hell for him. She bit him to the bone with her frenzy of rage, chagrin, and agony. She drove him mad, too: mad, so that he beat her: mad so that he longed to kill her. But even in his greatest rages it was the same: he never finally lost himself: he remained, somewhere in the centre, in possession of himself. She sometimes wished he would kill her: or that she would kill him. Neither event happened.

And neither of them understood what was happening. How should they? They were both dazed, horrified, and mortified. He took to leaving her alone as much as was possible. But when he had to come home, there was her terrible will, like a flat, cold snake coiled round his soul and squeezing him to death. Yes, she did not relent. She was a good wife and mother. All her duties she fulfilled. But she was not one to yield. He

must yield. That was written in eternal letters, on the iron tablet of her will. He must yield. She the woman, the mother of his children, how should she ever even think to yield? It was unthinkable. He, the man, the weak, the false, the treacherous, the half-hearted, it was he who must yield. Was not hers the divine will and the divine right? Ha, she would be less than woman if she ever capitulated, abandoned her divine responsibility as woman! No, he must yield.

So, he was unfaithful to her. Piling reproach after reproach upon himself, he added adultery to his brutality. And this was the beginning of the end. She was more than maddened: but he began to grow silent, unresponsive, as if he did not hear her. He was unfaithful to her: and oh, in such a low way. Such shame, such shame! But he only smiled carelessly now, and asked her what she wanted. She had asked for all she got. That he reiterated. And that was all he would do.

Terrible was, that she found even his smile of insolent indifference half-beautiful. Oh, bitter chain to bear! But she summoned up all her strange woman's will. She fought against his fascination, the fascination he exerted over her. With fearful efforts of will she fought against it, and mastered it. And then, suddenly, horror and agony of it, up it would rush in her again, her unbearable desire for him, the longing for his contact, his quality of beauty.

That was a cross hard to bear. Yet even that she bore. And schooled herself into a fretful, petulant manner of indifference. Her odd,

whimsical petulance hid a will which he, and he alone, knew to be stronger than steel, strong as a diabolical, cold, grey snake that presses and presses and cannot-relax: nay, cannot relax. She became the same as he. Even in her moments of most passionate desire for him, the cold and snake-like tension of her will never relaxed, and the cold, snake-like eye of her intention never closed.

So, till it reached a deadlock. Each will was wound tense, and so fixed. Fixed! There was neither any relaxing or any increase of pressure. Fixed. Hard like a numbness, a grip that was solidifying and turning to stone.

He realised, somehow, that at this terrible passive game of fixed tension she would beat him. Her fixed female soul, her wound-up female will would solidify into stone--whereas his must break. In him something must break. It was a cold and fatal deadlock, profitless. A life-automatism of fixed tension that suddenly, in him, did break. His will flew loose in a recoil: a recoil away from her. He left her, as inevitably as a broken spring flies out from its hold.

Not that he was broken. He would not do her even that credit. He had only flown loose from the old centre-fixture. His will was still entire and unabated. Only he did not know: he did not understand. He swung wildly about from place to place, as if he were broken.

Then suddenly, on this Sunday evening in the strange country, he

realised something about himself. He realised that he had never intended to yield himself fully to her or to anything: that he did not intend ever to yield himself up entirely to her or to anything: that his very being pivoted on the fact of his isolate self-responsibility, aloneness. His intrinsic and central aloneness was the very centre of his being. Break it, and he broke his being. Break this central aloneness, and he broke everything. It was the great temptation, to yield himself: and it was the final sacrilege. Anyhow, it was something which, from his profoundest soul, he did not intend to do. By the innermost isolation and singleness of his own soul he would abide though the skies fell on top of one another, and seven heavens collapsed.

Vaguely he realised this. And vaguely he realised that this had been the root cause of his strife with Lottie: Lottie, the only person who had mattered at all to him in all the world: save perhaps his mother. And his mother had not mattered, no, not one-half nor one-fifth what Lottie had mattered. So it was: there was, for him, only her significant in the universe. And between him and her matters were as they were.

He coldly and terribly hated her, for a moment. Then no more. There was no solution. It was a situation without a solution. But at any rate, it was now a defined situation. He could rest in peace.

Thoughts something in this manner ran through Aaron's subconscious mind as he sat still in the strange house. He could not have fired it all off at any listener, as these pages are fired off at any chance reader.

Nevertheless there it was, risen to half consciousness in him. All his life he had hated knowing what he felt. He had wilfully, if not consciously, kept a gulf between his passional soul and his open mind. In his mind was pinned up a nice description of himself, and a description of Lottie, sort of authentic passports to be used in the conscious world. These authentic passports, self-describing: nose short, mouth normal, etc.; he had insisted that they should do all the duty of the man himself. This ready-made and very banal idea of himself as a really quite nice individual: eyes blue, nose short, mouth normal, chin normal; this he had insisted was really himself. It was his conscious mask.

Now at last, after years of struggle, he seemed suddenly to have dropped his mask on the floor, and broken it. His authentic self-describing passport, his complete and satisfactory idea of himself suddenly became a rag of paper, ridiculous. What on earth did it matter if he was nice or not, if his chin was normal or abnormal.

His mask, his idea of himself dropped and was broken to bits. There he sat now maskless and invisible. That was how he strictly felt: invisible and undefined, rather like Wells' Invisible Man. He had no longer a mask to present to people: he was present and invisible: they could not really think anything about him, because they could not really see him. What did they see when they looked at him? Lady Franks, for example. He neither knew nor cared. He only knew he was invisible to himself and everybody, and that all thinking about what he was like was

only a silly game of Mrs. Mackenzie's Dead.

So there. The old Aaron Sisson was as if painfully transmuted, as the Invisible Man when he underwent his transmutations. Now he was gone, and no longer to be seen. His visibility lost for ever.

And then what? Sitting there as an invisible presence, the preconceived world melted also and was gone. Lady Franks, Sir William, all the guests, they talked and maneuvered with their visible personalities, manipulating the masks of themselves. And underneath there was something invisible and dying--something fading, wilting: the essential plasm of themselves: their invisible being.

Well now, and what next? Having in some curious manner tumbled from the tree of modern knowledge, and cracked and rolled out from the shell of the preconceived idea of himself like some dark, night-lustrous chestnut from the green ostensibility of the burr, he lay as it were exposed but invisible on the floor, knowing, but making no conceptions: knowing, but having no idea. Now that he was finally unmasked and exposed, the accepted idea of himself cracked and rolled aside like a broken chestnut-burr, the mask split and shattered, he was at last quiet and free. He had dreaded exposure: and behold, we cannot be exposed, for we are invisible. We cannot be exposed to the looks of others, for our very being is night-lustrous and unseeable. Like the Invisible Man, we are only revealed through our clothes and our masks.

In his own powerful but subconscious fashion Aaron realized this. He was a musician. And hence even his deepest ideas: were not word-ideas, his very thoughts were not composed of words and ideal concepts. They too, his thoughts and his ideas, were dark and invisible, as electric vibrations are invisible no matter how many words they may purport. If I, as a word-user, must translate his deep conscious vibrations into finite words, that is my own business. I do but make a translation of the man. He would speak in music. I speak with words.

The inaudible music of his conscious soul conveyed his meaning in him quite as clearly as I convey it in words: probably much more clearly. But in his own mode only: and it was in his own mode only he realised what I must put into words. These words are my own affair. His mind was music.

Don't grumble at me then, gentle reader, and swear at me that this damned fellow wasn't half clever enough to think all these smart things, and realise all these fine-drawn-out subtleties. You are quite right, he wasn't, yet it all resolved itself in him as I say, and it is for you to prove that it didn't.

In his now silent, maskless state of wordless comprehension, he knew that he had never wanted to surrender himself utterly to Lottie: nor to his mother: nor to anybody. The last extreme of self-abandon in love was for him an act of false behaviour. His own nature inside him fated him not to take this last false step, over the edge of the abyss of

selflessness. Even if he wanted to, he could not. He might struggle on the edge of the precipice like an assassin struggling with his own soul, but he could not conquer. For, according to all the current prejudice and impulse in one direction, he too had believed that the final achievement, the consummation of human life, was this flinging oneself over the precipice, down the bottomless pit of love. Now he realised that love, even in its intensest, was only an attribute of the human soul: one of its incomprehensible gestures. And to fling down the whole soul in one gesture of finality in love was as much a criminal suicide as to jump off a church-tower or a mountain-peak. Let a man give himself as much as he liked in love, to seven thousand extremities, he must never give himself away. The more generous and the more passionate a soul, the more it gives itself. But the more absolute remains the law, that it shall never give itself away. Give thyself, but give thyself not away. That is the lesson written at the end of the long strange lane of love.

The idee fixe of today is that every individual shall not only give himself, but shall achieve the last glory of giving himself away. And since this takes two--you can't even make a present of yourself unless you've got somebody to receive the present; since this last extra-divine act takes two people to perform it, you've got to take into count not only your giver but your receiver. Who is going to be the giver and who the receiver.

Why, of course, in our long-drawn-out Christian day, man is given and

woman is recipient. Man is the gift, woman the receiver. This is the sacrament we live by; the holy Communion we live for. That man gives himself to woman in an utter and sacred abandon, all, all, all himself given, and taken. Woman, eternal woman, she is the communicant. She receives the sacramental body and spirit of the man. And when she's got it, according to her passionate and all-too-sacred desire, completely, when she possesses her man at last finally and ultimately, without blemish or reservation in the perfection of the sacrament: then, also, poor woman, the blood and the body of which she has partaken become insipid or nauseous to her, she is driven mad by the endless meal of the marriage sacrament, poisoned by the sacred communion which was her goal and her soul's ambition.

We have pushed a process into a goal. The aim of any process is not the perpetuation of that process, but the completion thereof. Love is a process of the incomprehensible human soul: love also incomprehensible, but still only a process. The process should work to a completion, not to some horror of intensification and extremity wherein the soul and body ultimately perish. The completion of the process of love is the arrival at a state of simple, pure self-possession, for man and woman. Only that. Which isn't exciting enough for us sensationalists. We prefer abysses and maudlin self-abandon and self-sacrifice, the degeneration into a sort of slime and merge.

Perhaps, truly, the process of love is never accomplished. But it moves in great stages, and at the end of each stage a true goal, where the

soul possesses itself in simple and generous singleness. Without this, love is a disease.

So Aaron, crossing a certain border-line and finding himself alone completely, accepted his loneliness or singleness as a fulfilment, a state of fulfilment. The long fight with Lottie had driven him at last to himself, so that he was quiet as a thing which has its root deep in life, and has lost its anxiety. As for considering the lily, it is not a matter of consideration. The lily toils and spins hard enough, in her own way. But without that strain and that anxiety with which we try to weave ourselves a life. The lily is life-rooted, life-central. She cannot worry. She is life itself, a little, delicate fountain playing creatively, for as long or as short a time as may be, and unable to be anxious. She may be sad or sorry, if the north wind blows. But even then, anxious she cannot be. Whether her fountain play or cease to play, from out the cold, damp earth, she cannot be anxious. She may only be glad or sorry, and continue her way. She is perfectly herself, whatever befall! even if frosts cut her off. Happy lily, never to be saddled with an idee fixe, never to be in the grip of a monomania for happiness or love or fulfilment. It is not laisser aller. It is life-rootedness. It is being by oneself, life-living, like the much-mooted lily. One toils, one spins, one strives: just as the lily does. But like her, taking one's own life-way amidst everything, and taking one's own life-way alone. Love too. But there also, taking one's way alone, happily alone in all the wonders of communion, swept up on the winds, but never swept away from one's very self. Two eagles in mid-air, maybe, like Whitman's

Dalliance of Eagles. Two eagles in mid-air, grappling, whirling, coming to their intensification of love-oneness there in mid-air. In mid-air the love consummation. But all the time each lifted on its own wings: each bearing itself up on its own wings at every moment of the mid-air love consummation. That is the splendid love-way.

....

The party was festive at dinner-time, the women in their finest dresses, new flowers on the table, the best wine going. It was Sunday evening. Aaron too was dressed--and Lady Franks, in black lace and pearls, was almost gay. There were quails for dinner. The Colonel was quite happy. An air of conviviality gathered round the table during the course of the meal.

"I hope," said Aaron, "that we shall have some music tonight."

"I want so much to hear your flute," said his hostess.

"And I your piano," he said.

"I am very weak--very out of practise. I tremble at the thought of playing before a musician. But you must not be too critical."

"Oh," said Aaron, "I am not a man to be afraid of."

"Well, we will see," said Lady Franks. "But I am afraid of music itself."

"Yes," said Aaron. "I think it is risky."

"Risky! I don't see that! Music risky? Bach? Beethoven! No, I don't agree. On the contrary, I think it is most elevating--most morally inspiring. No, I tremble before it because it is so wonderful and elevating."

"I often find it makes me feel diabolical," said he.

"That is your misfortune, I am sure," said Lady Franks. "Please do take another--but perhaps you don't like mushrooms?"

Aaron quite liked mushrooms, and helped himself to the entree.

"But perhaps," said she, "you are too modern. You don't care for Bach or Beethoven or Chopin--dear Chopin."

"I find them all quite as modern as I am."

"Is that so! Yes. For myself I am quite old-fashioned--though I can appreciate Strauss and Stravinsky as well, some things. But my old

things--ah, I don't think the moderns are so fine. They are not so deep. They haven't fathomed life so deeply." Lady Franks sighed faintly.

"They don't care for depths," said Aaron.

"No, they haven't the capacity. But I like big, deep music. Oh, I love orchestra. But my instrument is the piano. I like the great masters, Bach, Beethoven. They have such faith. You were talking of faith--believing that things would work out well for you in the end. Beethoven inspires that in me, too."

"He makes you feel that all will be well with you at last?"

"Yes, he does. He makes me feel faith in my PERSONAL destiny. And I do feel that there is something in one's special fate. I feel that I myself have a special kind of fate, that will always look after me."

"And you can trust to it?"

"Yes, I can. It ALWAYS turns out right. I think something has gone wrong--and then, it always turns out right. Why when we were in London--when we were at lunch one morning it suddenly struck me, haven't I left my fur cloak somewhere? It was rather cold, so I had taken it with me, and then never put it on. And I hadn't brought it home. I had left it somewhere. But whether in a taxi, or in a shop, or in a little show of pictures I had been to, I couldn't remember. I COULD NOT

remember. And I thought to myself: have I lost my cloak? I went round to everywhere I could think of: no-trace of it. But I didn't give it up. Something prompted me not to give it up: quite distinctly, I felt something telling me that I should get it back. So I called at Scotland Yard and gave the information. Well, two days later I had a notice from Scotland Yard, so I went. And there was my cloak. I had it back. And that has happened to me almost every time. I almost always get my things back. And I always feel that something looks after me, do you know: almost takes care of me."

"But do you mean when you lose things--or in your life?"

"I mean when I lose things--or when I want to get something I want--I am very nearly ALWAYS successful. And I always feel there is some sort of higher power which does it for me."

"Finds your cloak for you."

"Yes. Wasn't it extraordinary? I felt when I saw my cloak in Scotland Yard: There, I KNEW I should recover you. And I always feel, as I say, that there is some higher power which helps me. Do you feel the same?"

"No, not that way, worse luck. I lost a batch of music a month ago which didn't belong to me--and which I couldn't replace. But I never could recover it: though I'm sure nobody wanted it."

"How very unfortunate! Whereas my fur cloak was just the thing that gets stolen most."

"I wished some power would trace my music: but apparently we aren't all gifted alike with guardian angels."

"Apparently not. And that is how I regard it: almost as a gift, you know, that my fairy godmother gave me in my cradle."

"For always recovering your property?"

"Yes--and succeeding in my undertakings."

"I'm afraid I had no fairy godmother."

"Well--I think I had. And very glad I am of it."

"Why, yes," said Aaron, looking at his hostess.

So the dinner sailed merrily on.

"But does Beethoven make you feel," said Aaron as an afterthought, "in the same way--that you will always find the things you have lost?"

"Yes--he makes me feel the same faith: that what I lose will be returned to me. Just as I found my cloak. And that if I enter into an

undertaking, it will be successful."

"And your life has been always successful?"

"Yes--almost always. We have succeeded with almost everything."

"Why, yes," said Aaron, looking at her again.

But even so, he could see a good deal of hard wornness under her satisfaction. She had had her suffering, sure enough. But none the less, she was in the main satisfied. She sat there, a good hostess, and expected the homage due to her success. And of course she got it. Aaron himself did his little share of shoe-licking, and swallowed the taste of boot-polish with a grimace, knowing what he was about.

The dinner wound gaily to an end. The ladies retired. Sir William left his seat of honour at the end of the table and came and sat next to Aaron, summoning the other three men to cluster near.

"Now, Colonel," said the host, "send round the bottle."

With a flourish of the elbow and shoulder, the Colonel sent on the port, actually port, in those bleak, post-war days!

"Well, Mr. Sisson," said Sir William, "we will drink to your kind Providence: providing, of course, that we shall give no offence by so

doing."

"No, sir; no, sir! The Providence belonged to Mr. Lilly. Mr. Sisson put his money on kindly fortune, I believe," said Arthur, who rosy and fresh with wine, looked as if he would make a marvelous bonne bouchee for a finely-discriminating cannibal.

"Ah, yes, indeed! A much more ingratiating lady to lift our glasses to. Mr. Sisson's kindly fortune. Fortuna gentil-issima! Well, Mr. Sisson, and may your Lady Fortune ever smile on you."

Sir William lifted his glass with an odd little smirk, some touch of a strange, prim old satyr lurking in his oddly inclined head. Nay, more than satyr: that curious, rather terrible iron demon that has fought with the world and wrung wealth from it, and which knows all about it. The devilish spirit of iron itself, and iron machines. So, with his strange, old smile showing his teeth rather terribly, the old knight glowered sightlessly over his glass at Aaron. Then he drank: the strange, careful, old-man's gesture in drinking.

"But," said Aaron, "if Fortune is a female---"

"Fortune! Fortune! Why, Fortune is a lady. What do you say, Major?"

"She has all the airs of one, Sir William," said the Major, with the wistful grimness of his age and culture. And the young fellow stared

like a crucified cyclops from his one eye: the black shutter being over the other.

"And all the graces," capped Sir William, delighted with himself.

"Oh, quite!" said the Major. "For some, all the airs, and for others, all the graces."

"Faint heart ne'er won fair lady, my boy," said Sir William. "Not that your heart is faint. On the contrary--as we know, and your country knows. But with Lady Fortune you need another kind of stout heart--oh, quite another kind."

"I believe it, sir: and the kind of stout heart which I am afraid I haven't got," said the Major.

"What!" said the old man. "Show the white feather before you've tackled the lady! Fill the Major's glass, Colonel. I am quite sure we will none of us ever say die."

"Not likely. Not if we know it," said the Colonel, stretching himself heartily inside his tunic. He was becoming ruddier than the cherry. All he cared about at the moment was his gay little port glass. But the Major's young cheek was hollow and sallow, his one eye terribly pathetic.

"And you, Mr. Sisson," said Sir William, "mean to carry all before you by taking no thought for the morrow. Well, now, we can only wish you success."

"I don't want to carry all before me," said Aaron. "I should be sorry. I want to walk past most of it."

"Can you tell us where to? I am intrigued, as Sybil says, to know where you will walk to. Come now. Enlighten us."

"Nowhere, I suppose."

"But is that satisfactory? Can you find it satisfactory?"

"Is it even true?" said the Major. "Isn't it quite as positive an act to walk away from a situation as to walk towards it?"

"My dear boy, you can't merely walk away from a situation. Believe that. If you walk away from Rome, you walk into the Maremma, or into the Alban Hills, or into the sea--but you walk into something. Now if I am going to walk away from Rome, I prefer to choose my direction, and therefore my destination."

"But you can't," said the Major.

"What can't you?"

"Choose. Either your direction or your destination." The Major was obstinate.

"Really!" said Sir William. "I have not found it so. I have not found it so. I have had to keep myself hard at work, all my life, choosing between this or that."

"And we," said the Major, "have no choice, except between this or nothing."

"Really! I am afraid," said Sir William, "I am afraid I am too old--or too young--which shall I say?--to understand."

"Too young, sir," said Arthur sweetly. "The child was always father to the man, I believe."

"I confess the Major makes me feel childish," said the old man. "The choice between this or nothing is a puzzler to me. Can you help me out, Mr. Sisson? What do you make of this this-or-nothing business? I can understand neck-or-nothing---"

"I prefer the NOTHING part of it to the THIS part of it," said Aaron, grinning.

"Colonel," said the old man, "throw a little light on this nothingness."

"No, Sir William," said the Colonel. "I am all right as I am."

"As a matter of fact, so are we all, perfectly A-one," said Arthur.

Aaron broke into a laugh.

"That's the top and bottom of it," he laughed, flushed with wine, and handsome. We're all as right as ninepence. Only it's rather nice to talk."

"There!" said Sir William. "We're all as right as ninepence! We're all as right ninepence. So there well leave it, before the Major has time to say he is twopence short." Laughing his strange old soundless laugh, Sir William rose and made a little bow. "Come up and join the ladies in a minute or two," he said. Arthur opened the door for him and he left the room.

The four men were silent for a moment--then the Colonel whipped up the decanter and filled his glass. Then he stood up and clinked glasses with Aaron, like a real old sport.

"Luck to you," he said.

"Thanks," said Aaron.

"You're going in the morning?" said Arthur.

"Yes," said Aaron.

"What train?" said Arthur.

"Eight-forty."

"Oh--then we shan't see you again. Well--best of luck."

"Best of luck--" echoed the Colonel.

"Same to you," said Aaron, and they all peered over their glasses and quite loved one another for a rosy minute.

"I should like to know, though," said the hollow-cheeked young Major with the black flap over his eye, "whether you do really mean you are all right--that it is all right with you--or whether you only say so to get away from the responsibility."

"I mean I don't really care--I don't a damn--let the devil take it all."

"The devil doesn't want it, either," said the Major.

"Then let him leave it. I don't care one single little curse about it all."

"Be damned. What is there to care about?" said the Colonel.

"Ay, what?" said Aaron.

"It's all the same, whether you care or don't care. So I say it's much easier not to care," said Arthur.

"Of course it is," said the Colonel gaily.

"And I think so, too," said Aaron.

"Right you are! We're all as right as ninepence--what? Good old sport! Here's yours!" cried the Colonel.

"We shall have to be going up," said Arthur, wise in his generation.

As they went into the hall, Arthur suddenly put one arm round Aaron's waist, and one arm round the Colonel's, and the three did a sudden little barn-dance towards the stairs. Arthur was feeling himself quite let loose again, back in his old regimental mess.

Approaching the foot of the stairs, he let go again. He was in that rosy condition when united-we-stand. But unfortunately it is a complicated job to climb the stairs in unison. The whole lot tends to fall backwards. Arthur, therefore, rosy, plump, looking so good to eat, stood

still a moment in order to find his own neatly-slippered feet. Having found them, he proceeded to put them carefully one before the other, and to his enchantment found that this procedure was carrying him magically up the stairs. The Colonel, like a drowning man, clutched feebly for the straw of the great stair-rail--and missed it. He would have gone under, but that Aaron's hand gripped his arm. So, orientating once more like a fragile tendril, he reached again for the banister rail, and got it. After which, lifting his feet as if they were little packets of sand tied to his trouser buttons, he manipulated his way upwards. Aaron was in that pleasant state when he saw what everybody else was doing and was unconscious of what he did himself. Whilst tall, gaunt, erect, like a murdered Hamlet resurrected in khaki, with the terrible black shutter over his eye, the young Major came last.

Arthur was making a stern fight for his composure. His whole future depended on it. But do what he would, he could not get the flushed, pleased, mess-happy look off his face. The Colonel, oh, awful man, did a sort of plump roly-poly-cake-walk, like a fat boy, right to the very door of that santum-sanctorum, the library. Aaron was inwardly convulsed. Even the Major laughed.

But Arthur stiffened himself militarily and cleared his throat. All four started to compose themselves, like actors going on the stage, outside that library door. And then Arthur softly, almost wistfully, opened and held the door for the others to pass. The Colonel slunk meekly in, and sat in a chair in the background. The Major stalked in expressionless,

and hovered towards the sofa where his wife sat.

There was a rather cold-water-down-your-back feeling in the library. The ladies had been waiting for coffee. Sir William was waiting, too. Therefore in a little tension, half silent, the coffee was handed round. Lady Franks was discussing something with Arthur's wife. Arthur's wife was in a cream lace dress, and looking what is called lovely. The Major's wife was in amethyst chiffon with dark-red roses, and was looking blindingly beautiful. The Colonel was looking into his coffee-cup as wistfully as if it contained the illusion of tawny port. The Major was looking into space, as if there and there alone, etc. Arthur was looking for something which Lady Franks had asked for, and which he was much too flushed to find. Sir William was looking at Aaron, and preparing for another coeur a coeur.

"Well," he said, "I doubt if you will care for Milan. It is one of the least Italian of all the towns, in my opinion. Venice, of course, is a thing apart. I cannot stand, myself, that miserable specimen the modern Roman. He has most of the vices of the old Romans and none of the virtues. The most congenial town, perhaps, for a stranger, is Florence. But it has a very bad climate."

Lady Franks rose significantly and left the room, accompanied by Arthur's wife. Aaron knew, silently, that he was summoned to follow. His hostess had her eye on him this evening. But always postponing his obedience to the cool commands of women, he remained talking with his

host in the library, and sipping creme de menthe! Came the ripple of the pianoforte from the open doorway down at the further end of the room. Lady Franks was playing, in the large drawing-room. And the ripple of the music contained in it the hard insistence of the little woman's will. Coldly, and decidedly, she intended there should be no more unsettling conversations for the old Sir William. Aaron was to come forthwith into the drawing room. Which Aaron plainly understood--and so he didn't go. No, he didn't go, though the pianoforte rippled and swelled in volume. No, and he didn't go even when Lady Franks left off playing and came into the library again. There he sat, talking with Sir William. Let us do credit to Lady Franks' will-power, and admit that the talk was quite empty and distracted--none of the depths and skirmishes of the previous occasions. None the less, the talk continued. Lady Franks retired, discomfited, to her piano again. She would never break in upon her lord.

So now Aaron relented. He became more and more distracted. Sir William wandered away like some restless, hunted soul. The Colonel still sat in his chair, nursing his last drop of creme de menthe resentfully. He did not care for the green toffee-stuff. Arthur was busy. The Major lay sprawled in the last stages of everything on the sofa, holding his wife's hand. And the music came pathetically through the open folding-doors. Of course, she played with feeling--it went without saying. Aaron's soul felt rather tired. But she had a touch of discrimination also.

He rose and went to the drawing-room. It was a large, vacant-seeming, Empire sort of drawing-room, with yellow silk chairs along the walls and yellow silk panels upon the walls, and a huge, vasty crystal chandelier hanging from a faraway-above ceiling. Lady Franks sat at a large black Bechstein piano at one end of this vacant yellow state-room. She sat, a little plump elderly lady in black lace, for all the world like Queen Victoria in Max Beerbohm's drawing of Alfred Tennyson reading to her Victorian Majesty, with space before her. Arthur's wife was bending over some music in a remote corner of the big room.

Aaron seated himself on one of the chairs by the wall, to listen. Certainly it was a beautiful instrument. And certainly, in her way, she loved it. But Aaron remembered an anthem in which he had taken part as a boy.

> His eye is on the sparrow
> So I know He watches me.

For a long time he had failed to catch the word sparrow, and had heard:

> His eye is on the spy-hole
> So I know He watches me.

Which was just how it had all seemed to him, as a boy.

Now, as ever, he felt the eye was on the spy-hole. There sat the woman playing music. But her inward eye was on the spy-hole of her vital affairs--her domestic arrangements, her control of her household, guests and husband included. The other eye was left for the music, don't you know.

Sir William appeared hovering in the doorway, not at all liking the defection of Mr. Aaron. Then he retreated. He seemed not to care for music. The Major's wife hovered--felt it her duty to aude, or play audience--and entered, seating herself in a breath of lilac and amethyst again at the near distance. The Major, after a certain beating about the bush, followed and sat wrapt in dim contemplation near his wife. Arthur luckily was still busy with something.

Aaron of course made proper musical remarks in the intervals--Arthur's wife sorted out more pieces. Arthur appeared--and then the Colonel. The Colonel tip-toed beautifully across the wide blank space of the Empire room, and seated himself on a chair, rather in the distance, with his back to the wall, facing Aaron. When Lady Franks finished her piece, to everybody's amazement the Colonel clapped gaily to himself and said Bravo! as if at a Cafe Chantant, looking round for his glass. But there was no glass. So he crossed his neatly-khakied legs, and looked rapt

again.

Lady Franks started with a vivace Schumann piece. Everybody listened in sanctified silence, trying to seem to like it. When suddenly our Colonel began to spring and bounce in his chair, slinging his loose leg with a kind of rapture up and down in the air, and capering upon his posterior, doing a sitting-down jig to the Schumann vivace. Arthur, who had seated himself at the farthest extremity of the room, winked with wild bliss at Aaron. The Major tried to look as if he noticed nothing, and only succeeded in looking agonised. His wife studied the point of her silver shoe minutely, and peeped through her hair at the performance. Aaron grimly chuckled, and loved the Colonel with real tenderness.

And the game went on while the vivace lasted. Up and down bounced the plump Colonel on his chair, kicking with his bright, black-patent toe higher and higher, getting quite enthusiastic over his jig. Rosy and unabashed, he was worthy of the great nation he belonged to. The broad-seated Empire chair showed no signs of giving way. Let him enjoy himself, away there across the yellow Sahara of this silk-panelled salon. Aaron felt quite cheered up.

"Well, now," he thought to himself, "this man is in entire command of a very important branch of the British Service in Italy. We are a great race still."

But Lady Franks must have twigged. Her playing went rather stiff. She came to the end of the vivace movement, and abandoned her piece.

"I always prefer Schumann in his vivace moods," said Aaron.

"Do you?" said Lady Franks. "Oh, I don't know."

It was now the turn of Arthur's wife to sing. Arthur seemed to get further away: if it was possible, for he was at the remotest remote end of the room, near the gallery doors. The Colonel became quiet, pensive. The Major's wife eyed the young woman in white lace, and seemed not to care for lace. Arthur seemed to be trying to push himself backwards through the wall. Lady Franks switched on more lights into the vast and voluminous crystal chandelier which hung like some glory-cloud above the room's centre. And Arthur's wife sang sweet little French songs, and Ye Banks and Braes, and Caro mio ben, which goes without saying: and so on. She had quite a nice voice and was quite adequately trained. Which is enough said. Aaron had all his nerves on edge.

Then he had to play the flute. Arthur strolled upstairs with him, arm-in-arm, where he went to fetch his instrument.

"I find music in the home rather a strain, you know," said Arthur.

"Cruel strain. I quite agree," said Aaron.

"I don't mind it so much in the theatre--or even a concert--where there are a lot of other people to take the edge off-- But after a good dinner--"

"It's medicine," said Aaron.

"Well, you know, it really is, to me. It affects my inside." Aaron laughed. And then, in the yellow drawing-room, blew into his pipe and played. He knew so well that Arthur, the Major, the Major's wife, the Colonel, and Sir William thought it merely an intolerable bore. However, he played. His hostess even accompanied him in a Mozart bit.