CHAPTER XIV. XX SETTEMBRE

Aaron was awakened in the morning by the soft entrance of the butler with the tray: it was just seven o'clock. Lady Franks' household was punctual as the sun itself.

But our hero roused himself with a wrench. The very act of lifting himself from the pillow was like a fight this morning. Why? He recognized his own wrench, the pain with which he struggled under the necessity to move. Why shouldn't he want to move? Why not? Because he didn't want the day in front--the plunge into a strange country, towards nowhere, with no aim in view. True, he said that ultimately he wanted to join Lilly. But this was hardly more than a sop, an excuse for his own irrational behaviour. He was breaking loose from one connection after another; and what for? Why break every tie? Snap, snap, snap went the bonds and ligatures which bound him to the life that had formed him, the people he had loved or liked. He found all his affections snapping off, all the ties which united him with his own people coming asunder. And why? In God's name, why? What was there instead?

There was nothingness. There was just himself, and blank nothingness. He had perhaps a faint sense of Lilly ahead of him; an impulse in that direction, or else merely an illusion. He could not persuade himself that he was seeking for love, for any kind of unison or communion. He knew well enough that the thought of any loving, any sort of real coming

together between himself and anybody or anything, was just objectionable to him. No--he was not moving towards anything: he was moving almost violently away from everything. And that was what he wanted. Only that. Only let him not run into any sort of embrace with anything or anybody--this was what he asked. Let no new connection be made between himself and anything on earth. Let all old connections break. This was his craving.

Yet he struggled under it this morning as under the lid of a tomb. The terrible sudden weight of inertia! He knew the tray stood ready by the bed: he knew the automobile would be at the door at eight o'clock, for Lady Franks had said so, and he half divined that the servant had also said so: yet there he lay, in a kind of paralysis in this bed. He seemed for the moment to have lost his will. Why go forward into more nothingness, away from all that he knew, all he was accustomed to and all he belonged to?

However, with a click he sat up. And the very instant he had poured his coffee from the little silver coffee-pot into his delicate cup, he was ready for anything and everything. The sense of silent adventure took him, the exhilarated feeling that he was fulfilling his own inward destiny. Pleasant to taste was the coffee, the bread, the honey--delicious.

The man brought his clothes, and again informed him that the automobile would be at the door at eight o'clock: or at least so he made out.

"I can walk," said Aaron.

"Milady ha comandato l'automobile," said the man softly.

It was evident that if Milady had ordered it, so it must be.

So Aaron left the still-sleeping house, and got into the soft and luxurious car. As he dropped through the park he wondered that Sir William and Lady Franks should be so kind to him: a complete stranger. But so it was. There he sat in their car. He wondered, also, as he ran over the bridge and into the city, whether this soft-running automobile would ever rouse the socialistic bile of the work-people. For the first time in his life, as he sat among the snug cushions, he realised what it might be to be rich and uneasy: uneasy, even if not afraid, lurking there inside an expensive car.--Well, it wasn't much of a sensation anyhow: and riches were stuffy, like wadded upholstery on everything. He was glad to get out into the fresh air of the common crowd. He was glad to be in the bleak, not-very-busy station. He was glad to be part of common life. For the very atmosphere of riches seems to be stuffed and wadded, never any real reaction. It was terrible, as if one's very body, shoulders and arms, were upholstered and made cushiony. Ugh, but he was glad to shake off himself the atmosphere of wealth and motor-cars, to get out of it all. It was like getting out of quilted clothes.

"Well," thought Aaron, "if this is all it amounts to, to be rich, you

can have riches. They talk about money being power. But the only sort of power it has over me is to bring on a kind of numbness, which I fairly hate. No wonder rich people don't seem to be really alive."

The relief of escaping quite took away his self-conscious embarrassment at the station. He carried his own bags, bought a third-class ticket, and got into the train for Milan without caring one straw for the comments or the looks of the porters.

It began to rain. The rain ran across the great plain of north Italy. Aaron sat in his wood-seated carriage and smoked his pipe in silence, looking at the thick, short Lombards opposite him without heeding them. He paid hardly any outward attention to his surroundings, but sat involved in himself.

In Milan he had been advised to go to the Hotel Britannia, because it was not expensive, and English people went there. So he took a carriage, drove round the green space in front of Milan station, and away into the town. The streets were busy, but only half-heartedly so.

It must be confessed that every new move he made was rather an effort. Even he himself wondered why he was struggling with foreign porters and foreign cabmen, being talked at and not understanding a word. But there he was. So he went on with it.

The hotel was small and congenial. The hotel porter answered in English.

Aaron was given a little room with a tiny balcony, looking on to a quiet street. So, he had a home of his own once more. He washed, and then counted his money. Thirty-seven pounds he had: and no more. He stood on the balcony and looked at the people going by below. Life seems to be moving so quick, when one looks down on it from above.

Across the road was a large stone house with its green shutters all closed. But from the flagpole under the eaves, over the central window of the uppermost floor--the house was four storeys high--waved the Italian flag in the melancholy damp air. Aaron looked at it--the red, white and green tricolour, with the white cross of Savoy in the centre. It hung damp and still. And there seemed a curious vacancy in the city--something empty and depressing in the great human centre. Not that there was really a lack of people. But the spirit of the town seemed depressed and empty. It was a national holiday. The Italian flag was hanging from almost every housefront.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon. Aaron sat in the restaurant of the hotel drinking tea, for he was rather tired, and looking through the thin curtains at the little square outside, where people passed: little groups of dark, aimless-seeming men, a little bit poorer looking--perhaps rather shorter in stature--but very much like the people in any other town. Yet the feeling of the city was so different from that of London. There seemed a curious emptiness. The rain had ceased, but the pavements were still wet. There was a tension.

Suddenly there was a noise of two shots, fired in rapid succession. Aaron turned startled to look into the quiet piazza. And to his amazement, the pavements were empty, not a soul was in sight. Two minutes before the place was busy with passers-by, and a newspaper man selling the Corriere, and little carriages rattling through. Now, as if by magic, nobody, nothing. It was as if they had all melted into thin air.

The waiter, too, was peeping behind the curtain. A carriage came trotting into the square--an odd man took his way alone--the traffic began to stir once more, and people reappeared as suddenly as they had disappeared. Then the waiter ran hastily and furtively out and craned his neck, peering round the square. He spoke with two youths--rather loutish youths. Then he returned to his duty in the hotel restaurant.

"What was it? What were the shots?" Aaron asked him.

"Oh--somebody shooting at a dog," said the man negligently.

"At a dog!" said Aaron, with round eyes.

He finished his tea, and went out into the town. His hotel was not far from the cathedral square. Passing through the arcade, he came in sight of the famous cathedral with its numerous spines pricking into the afternoon air. He was not as impressed as he should have been. And yet there was something in the northern city--this big square with all the

trams threading through, the little yellow Continental trams: and the spiny bulk of the great cathedral, like a grey-purple sea-urchin with many spines, on the one side, the ornamental grass-plots and flower beds on the other: the big shops going all along the further strands, all round: and the endless restless nervous drift of a north Italian crowd, so nervous, so twitchy; nervous and twitchy as the slipping past of the little yellow tram-cars; it all affected him with a sense of strangeness, nervousness, and approaching winter. It struck him the people were afraid of themselves: afraid of their own souls, and that which was in their own souls.

Turning up the broad steps of the cathedral, he entered the famous building. The sky had cleared, and the freshened light shone coloured in living tablets round the wonderful, towering, rose-hearted dusk of the great church. At some altars lights flickered uneasily. At some unseen side altar mass was going on, and a strange ragged music fluttered out on the incense-dusk of the great and lofty interior, which was all shadow, all shadow, hung round with jewel tablets of light. Particularly beautiful the great east bay, above the great altar. And all the time, over the big-patterned marble floor, the faint click and rustle of feet coming and going, coming and going, like shallow uneasy water rustled back and forth in a trough. A white dog trotted pale through the under-dusk, over the pale, big-patterned floor. Aaron came to the side altar where mass was going on, candles ruddily wavering. There was a small cluster of kneeling women--a ragged handful of on-looking men--and people wandering up and wandering away, young women with neatly dressed

black hair, and shawls, but without hats; fine young women in very high heels; young men with nothing to do; ragged men with nothing to do. All strayed faintly clicking over the slabbed floor, and glanced at the flickering altar where the white-surpliced boys were curtseying and the white-and-gold priest bowing, his hands over his breast, in the candle-light. All strayed, glanced, lingered, and strayed away again, as if the spectacle were not sufficiently holding. The bell chimed for the elevation of the Host. But the thin trickle of people trickled the same, uneasily, over the slabbed floor of the vastly-upreaching shadow-foliaged cathedral.

The smell of incense in his nostrils, Aaron went out again by a side door, and began to walk along the pavements of the cathedral square, looking at the shops. Some were closed, and had little notices pinned on them. Some were open, and seemed half-stocked with half-elegant things. Men were carrying newspapers. In the cafes a few men were seated drinking vermouth. In the doorway of the restaurants waiters stood inert, looking out on the streets. The curious heart-eating ennui of the big town on a holiday came over our hero. He felt he must get out, whatever happened. He could not bear it.

So he went back to his hotel and up to his room. It was still only five o'clock. And he did not know what to do with himself. He lay down on the bed, and looked at the painting on his bedroom ceiling. It was a terrible business in reckitt's blue and browny gold, with awful heraldic beasts, rather worm-wriggly, displayed in a blue field.

As he lay thinking of nothing and feeling nothing except a certain weariness, or dreariness, or tension, or God-knows-what, he heard a loud hoarse noise of humanity in the distance, something frightening. Rising, he went on to his little balcony. It was a sort of procession, or march of men, here and there a red flag fluttering from a man's fist. There had been a big meeting, and this was the issue. The procession was irregular, but powerful, men four abreast. They emerged irregularly from the small piazza to the street, calling and vociferating. They stopped before a shop and clotted into a crowd, shouting, becoming vicious. Over the shop-door hung a tricolour, a national flag. The shop was closed, but the men began to knock at the door. They were all workmen, some in railway men's caps, mostly in black felt hats. Some wore red cotton neck-ties. They lifted their faces to the national flag, and as they shouted and gesticulated Aaron could see their strong teeth in their jaws. There was something frightening in their lean, strong Italian jaws, something inhuman and possessed-looking in their foreign, southern-shaped faces, so much more formed and demon-looking than northern faces. They had a demon-like set purpose, and the noise of their voices was like a jarring of steel weapons. Aaron wondered what they wanted. There were no women--all men--a strange male, slashing sound. Vicious it was--the head of the procession swirling like a little pool, the thick wedge of the procession beyond, flecked with red flags.

A window opened above the shop, and a frowsty-looking man, yellow-pale, was quickly and nervously hauling in the national flag. There were

shouts of derision and mockery--a great overtone of acrid derision--the flag and its owner ignominiously disappeared. And the procession moved on. Almost every shop had a flag flying. And every one of these flags now disappeared, quickly or slowly, sooner or later, in obedience to the command of the vicious, derisive crowd, that marched and clotted slowly down the street, having its own way.

Only one flag remained flying--the big tricolour that floated from the top storey of the house opposite Aaron's hotel. The ground floor of this house consisted of shop-premises--now closed. There was no sign of any occupant. The flag floated inert aloft.

The whole crowd had come to a stop immediately below the hotel, and all were now looking up at the green and white and red tricolour which stirred damply in the early evening light, from under the broad eaves of the house opposite. Aaron looked at the long flag, which drooped almost unmoved from the eaves-shadow, and he half expected it to furl itself up of its own accord, in obedience to the will of the masses. Then he looked down at the packed black shoulders of the mob below, and at the curious clustering pattern of a sea of black hats. He could hardly see anything but hats and shoulders, uneasily moving like boiling pitch away beneath him. But the shouts began to come up hotter and hotter. There had been a great ringing of a door-bell and battering on the shop-door. The crowd--the swollen head of the procession--talked and shouted, occupying the centre of the street, but leaving the pavement clear.
A woman in a white blouse appeared in the shop-door. She came out and

looked up at the flag and shook her head and gesticulated with her hands. It was evidently not her flag--she had nothing to do with it. The leaders again turned to the large house-door, and began to ring all the bells and to knock with their knuckles. But no good--there was no answer. They looked up again at the flag. Voices rose ragged and ironical. The woman explained something again. Apparently there was nobody at home in the upper floors--all entrance was locked--there was no caretaker. Nobody owned the flag. There it hung under the broad eaves of the strong stone house, and didn't even know that it was guilty. The woman went back into her shop and drew down the iron shutter from inside.

The crowd, nonplussed, now began to argue and shout and whistle. The voices rose in pitch and derision. Steam was getting up. There hung the flag. The procession crowded forward and filled the street in a mass below. All the rest of the street was empty and shut up. And still hung the showy rag, red and white and green, up aloft.

Suddenly there was a lull--then shouts, half-encouraging, half-derisive. And Aaron saw a smallish-black figure of a youth, fair-haired, not more than seventeen years old, clinging like a monkey to the front of the house, and by the help of the heavy drain-pipe and the stone-work ornamentation climbing up to the stone ledge that ran under ground-floor windows, up like a sudden cat on to the projecting footing. He did not stop there, but continued his race like some frantic lizard running up the great wall-front, working away from the noise below, as if in sheer

fright. It was one unending wriggling movement, sheer up the front of the impassive, heavy stone house.

The flag hung from a pole under one of the windows of the top storey--the third floor. Up went the wriggling figure of the possessed youth. The cries of the crowd below were now wild, ragged ejaculations of excitement and encouragement. The youth seemed to be lifted up, almost magically on the intense upreaching excitement of the massed men below. He passed the ledge of the first floor, like a lizard he wriggled up and passed the ledge or coping of the second floor, and there he was, like an upward-climbing shadow, scrambling on to the coping of the third floor. The crowd was for a second electrically still as the boy rose there erect, cleaving to the wall with the tips of his fingers.

But he did not hesitate for one breath. He was on his feet and running along the narrow coping that went across the house under the third floor windows, running there on that narrow footing away above the street, straight to the flag. He had got it--he had clutched it in his hand, a handful of it. Exactly like a great flame rose the simultaneous yell of the crowd as the boy jerked and got the flag loose. He had torn it down. A tremendous prolonged yell, touched with a snarl of triumph, and searing like a puff of flame, sounded as the boy remained for one moment with the flag in his hand looking down at the crowd below. His face was odd and elated and still. Then with the slightest gesture he threw the flag from him, and Aaron watched the gaudy remnant falling towards the many faces, whilst the noise of yelling rose up unheard.

There was a great clutch and hiss in the crowd. The boy still stood unmoved, holding by one hand behind him, looking down from above, from his dangerous elevation, in a sort of abstraction.

And the next thing Aaron was conscious of was the sound of trumpets. A sudden startling challenge of trumpets, and out of nowhere a sudden rush of grey-green carabinieri battering the crowd wildly with truncheons. It was so sudden that Aaron heard nothing any more. He only saw.

In utmost amazement he saw the greeny-grey uniformed carabinieri rushing thick and wild and indiscriminate on the crowd: a sudden new excited crowd in uniforms attacking the black crowd, beating them wildly with truncheons. There was a seething moment in the street below. And almost instantaneously the original crowd burst into a terror of frenzy. The mob broke as if something had exploded inside it. A few black-hatted men fought furiously to get themselves free of the hated soldiers; in the confusion bunches of men staggered, reeled, fell, and were struggling among the legs of their comrades and of the carabinieri. But the bulk of the crowd just burst and fled--in every direction. Like drops of water they seemed to fly up at the very walls themselves. They darted into any entry, any doorway. They sprang up the walls and clambered into the ground-floor windows. They sprang up the walls on to window-ledges, and then jumped down again, and ran--clambering, wriggling, darting, running in every direction; some cut, blood on their faces, terror or frenzy of flight in their hearts. Not so much terror as the frenzy of running

away. In a breath the street was empty.

And all the time, there above on the stone coping stood the long-faced, fair-haired boy, while four stout carabinieri in the street below stood with uplifted revolvers and covered him, shouting that if he moved they would shoot. So there he stood, still looking down, still holding with his left hand behind him, covered by the four revolvers. He was not so much afraid as twitchily self-conscious because of his false position.

Meanwhile down below the crowd had dispersed--melted momentaneously. The carabinieri were busy arresting the men who had fallen and been trodden underfoot, or who had foolishly let themselves be taken; perhaps half a dozen men, half a dozen prisoners; less rather than more. The sergeant ordered these to be secured between soldiers. And last of all the youth up above, still covered by the revolvers, was ordered to come down. He turned quite quietly, and quite humbly, cautiously picked his way along the coping towards the drain-pipe. He reached this pipe and began, in humiliation, to climb down. It was a real climb down.

Once in the street he was surrounded by the grey uniforms. The soldiers formed up. The sergeant gave the order. And away they marched, the dejected youth a prisoner between them.

Then were heard a few scattered yells of derision and protest, a few shouts of anger and derision against the carabinieri. There were once more gangs of men and groups of youths along the street. They sent up an

occasional shout. But always over their shoulders, and pretending it was not they who shouted. They were all cowed and hang-dog once more, and made not the slightest effort to save the youth. Nevertheless, they prowled and watched, ready for the next time.

So, away went the prisoner and the grey-green soldiers, and the street was left to the little gangs and groups of hangdog, discontented men, all thoroughly out of countenance. The scene was ended.

Aaron looked round, dazed. And then for the first time he noticed, on the next balcony to his own, two young men: young gentlemen, he would have said. The one was tall and handsome and well-coloured, might be Italian. But the other with his pale thin face and his rimless monocle in his eye, he was surely an Englishman. He was surely one of the young officers shattered by the war. A look of strange, arch, bird-like pleasure was on his face at this moment: if one could imagine the gleaming smile of a white owl over the events that had just passed, this was the impression produced on Aaron by the face of the young man with the monocle. The other youth, the ruddy, handsome one, had knitted his brows in mock distress, and was glancing with a look of shrewd curiosity at Aaron, and with a look of almost self-satisfied excitement first to one end of the street, then to the other.

"But imagine, Angus, it's all over!" he said, laying his hand on the arm of the monocled young man, and making great eyes--not without a shrewd glance in Aaron's direction.

"Did you see him fall!" replied Angus, with another strange gleam.

"Yes. But was he HURT--?"

"I don't know. I should think so. He fell right back out of that on to those stones!"

"But how perfectly AWFUL! Did you ever see anything like it?"

"No. It's one of the funniest things I ever did see. I saw nothing quite like it, even in the war--"

Here Aaron withdrew into his room. His mind and soul were in a whirl. He sat down in his chair, and did not move again for a great while. When he did move, he took his flute and played he knew not what. But strange, strange his soul passed into his instrument. Or passed half into his instrument. There was a big residue left, to go bitter, or to ferment into gold old wine of wisdom.

He did not notice the dinner gong, and only the arrival of the chamber-maid, to put the wash-table in order, sent him down to the restaurant. The first thing he saw, as he entered, was the two young Englishmen seated at a table in a corner just behind him. Their hair was brushed straight back from their foreheads, making the sweep of the head bright and impeccable, and leaving both the young faces clear as if in

cameo. Angus had laid his monocle on the table, and was looking round the room with wide, light-blue eyes, looking hard, like some bird-creature, and seeming to see nothing. He had evidently been very ill: was still very ill. His cheeks and even his jaw seemed shrunken, almost withered. He forgot his dinner: or he did not care for it. Probably the latter.

"What do you think, Francis," he said, "of making a plan to see Florence and Sienna and Orvieto on the way down, instead of going straight to Rome?" He spoke in precise, particularly-enunciated words, in a public-school manner, but with a strong twang of South Wales.

"Why, Angus," came the graceful voice of Francis, "I thought we had settled to go straight through via Pisa." Francis was graceful in everything--in his tall, elegant figure, in the poses of his handsome head, in the modulation of his voice.

"Yes, but I see we can go either way--either Pisa or Florence. And I thought it might be nice to look at Florence and Sienna and Orvieto. I believe they're very lovely," came the soft, precise voice of Angus, ending in a touch of odd emotion on the words "very lovely," as if it were a new experience to him to be using them.

"I'm SURE they're marvellous. I'm quite sure they're marvellously beautiful," said Francis, in his assured, elegant way. "Well, then, Angus--suppose we do that, then?--When shall we start?"

Angus was the nervous insister. Francis was quite occupied with his own thoughts and calculations and curiosity. For he was very curious, not to say inquisitive. And at the present moment he had a new subject to ponder.

This new subject was Aaron, who sat with his back to our new couple, and who, with his fine sharp ears, caught every word that they said. Aaron's back was broad enough, and his shoulders square, and his head rather small and fairish and well-shaped--and Francis was intrigued. He wanted to know, was the man English. He looked so English--yet he might be--he might perhaps be Danish, Scandinavian, or Dutch. Therefore, the elegant young man watched and listened with all his ears.

The waiter who had brought Aaron his soup now came very free and easy, to ask for further orders.

"What would you like to drink? Wine? Chianti? Or white wine? Or beer?"--The old-fashioned "Sir" was dropped. It is too old-fashioned now, since the war.

"What SHOULD I drink?" said Aaron, whose acquaintance with wines was not very large.

"Half-litre of Chianti: that is very good," said the waiter, with the air of a man who knew only too well how to bring up his betters, and

train them in the way they should go.

"All right," said Aaron.

The welcome sound of these two magic words, All Right! was what the waiter most desired. "All right! Yes! All Right!" This is the pith, the marrow, the sum and essence of the English language to a southerner. Of course it is not all right. It is Or-rye--and one word at that. The blow that would be given to most foreign waiters, if they were forced to realize that the famous orye was really composed of two words, and spelt all right, would be too cruel, perhaps.

"Half litre Chianti. Orye," said the waiter. And we'll let him say it.

"ENGLISH!" whispered Francis melodramatically in the ear of Angus. "I THOUGHT so. The flautist."

Angus put in his monocle, and stared at the oblivious shoulders of Aaron, without apparently seeing anything. "Yes. Obviously English," said Angus, pursing like a bird.

"Oh, but I heard him," whispered Francis emphatically. "Quite," said Angus. "But quite inoffensive."

"Oh, but Angus, my dear--he's the FLAUTIST. Don't you remember? The divine bit of Scriabin. At least I believe it was Scriabin.--But

PERFECTLY DIVINE!!! I adore the flute above all things--" And Francis placed his hand on Angus' arm, and rolled his eyes--Lay this to the credit of a bottle of Lacrimae Cristi, if you like.

"Yes. So do I," said Angus, again looking archly through the monocle, and seeing nothing. "I wonder what he's doing here."

"Don't you think we might ASK him?" said Francis, in a vehement whisper. "After all, we are the only three English people in the place."

"For the moment, apparently we are," said Angus. "But the English are all over the place wherever you go, like bits of orange peel in the street. Don't forget that, Francesco."

"No, Angus, I don't. The point is, his flute is PERFECTLY DIVINE--and he seems quite attractive in himself. Don't you think so?"

"Oh, quite," said Angus, whose observations had got no further than the black cloth of the back of Aaron's jacket. That there was a man inside he had not yet paused to consider.

"Quite a musician," said Francis.

"The hired sort," said Angus, "most probably."

"But he PLAYS--he plays most marvellously. THAT you can't get away from,

Angus."

"I quite agree," said Angus.

"Well, then? Don't you think we might hear him again? Don't you think we might get him to play for us?--But I should love it more than anything."

"Yes, I should, too," said Angus. "You might ask him to coffee and a liqueur."

"I should like to--most awfully. But do you think I might?"

"Oh, yes. He won't mind being offered a coffee and liqueur. We can give him something decent--Where's the waiter?" Angus lifted his pinched, ugly bare face and looked round with weird command for the waiter. The waiter, having not much to do, and feeling ready to draw these two weird young birds, allowed himself to be summoned.

"Where's the wine list? What liqueurs have you got?" demanded Angus abruptly.

The waiter rattled off a list, beginning with Strega and ending with cherry brandy.

"Grand Marnier," said Angus. "And leave the bottle."

Then he looked with arch triumph at Francis, like a wicked bird. Francis bit his finger moodily, and glowered with handsome, dark-blue uncertain eyes at Mr. Aaron, who was just surveying the Frutte, which consisted of two rather old pomegranates and various pale yellow apples, with a sprinkling of withered dried figs. At the moment, they all looked like a Natura Morta arrangement.

"But do you think I might--?" said Francis moodily. Angus pursed his lips with a reckless brightness.

"Why not? I see no reason why you shouldn't," he said. Whereupon Francis cleared his throat, disposed of his serviette, and rose to his feet, slowly but gracefully. Then he composed himself, and took on the air he wished to assume at the moment. It was a nice degage air, half naive and half enthusiastic. Then he crossed to Aaron's table, and stood on one lounging hip, gracefully, and bent forward in a confidential manner, and said:

"Do excuse me. But I MUST ask you if it was you we heard playing the flute so perfectly wonderfully, just before dinner."

The voice was confidential and ingratiating. Aaron, relieved from the world's stress and seeing life anew in the rosy glow of half a litre of good old Chianti--the war was so near but gone by--looked up at the dark blue, ingenuous, well-adapted eyes of our friend Francis, and smiling, said:

"Yes, I saw you on the balcony as well."

"Oh, did you notice us?" plunged Francis. "But wasn't it an extraordinary affair?"

"Very," said Aaron. "I couldn't make it out, could you?"

"Oh," cried Francis. "I never try. It's all much too new and complicated for me.--But perhaps you know Italy?"

"No, I don't," said Aaron.

"Neither do we. And we feel rather stunned. We had only just arrived--and then--Oh!" Francis put up his hand to his comely brow and rolled his eyes. "I feel perfectly overwhelmed with it still."

He here allowed himself to sink friendlily into the vacant chair opposite Aaron's.

"Yes, I thought it was a bit exciting," said Aaron. "I wonder what will become of him--"

"--Of the one who climbed for the flag, you mean? No!--But wasn't it perfectly marvellous! Oh, incredible, quite incredible!--And then your flute to finish it all! Oh! I felt it only wanted that.--I haven't got

over it yet. But your playing was MARVELLOUS, really marvellous. Do you know, I can't forget it. You are a professional musician, of course."

"If you mean I play for a living," said Aaron. "I have played in orchestras in London."

"Of course! Of course! I knew you must be a professional. But don't you give private recitals, too?"

"No, I never have."

"Oh!" cried Francis, catching his breath. "I can't believe it. But you play MARVELLOUSLY! Oh, I just loved it, it simply swept me away, after that scene in the street. It seemed to sum it all up, you know."

"Did it," said Aaron, rather grimly.

"But won't you come and have coffee with us at our table?" said Francis. "We should like it most awfully if you would."

"Yes, thank you," said Aaron, half-rising.

"But you haven't had your dessert," said Francis, laying a fatherly detaining hand on the arm of the other man. Aaron looked at the detaining hand.

"The dessert isn't much to stop for," he said. "I can take with me what I want." And he picked out a handful of dried figs.

The two went across to Angus' table.

"We're going to take coffee together," said Francis complacently, playing the host with a suave assurance that was rather amusing and charming in him.

"Yes. I'm very glad," said Angus. Let us give the show away: he was being wilfully nice. But he was quite glad; to be able to be so nice. Anything to have a bit of life going: especially a bit of pleased life. He looked at Aaron's comely, wine-warmed face with gratification.

"Have a Grand Marnier," he said. "I don't know how bad it is. Everything is bad now. They lay it down to the war as well. It used to be quite a decent drink. What the war had got to do with bad liqueurs, I don't know."

Aaron sat down in a chair at their table.

"But let us introduce ourselves," said Francis. "I am Francis--or really Franz Dekker--And this is Angus Guest, my friend."

"And my name is Aaron Sisson."

"What! What did you say?" said Francis, leaning forward. He, too, had sharp ears.

"Aaron Sisson."

"Aaron Sisson! Oh, but how amusing! What a nice name!"

"No better than yours, is it?"

"Mine! Franz Dekker! Oh, much more amusing, I think," said Francis archly.

"Oh, well, it's a matter of opinion. You're the double decker, not me."

"The double decker!" said Francis archly. "Why, what do you mean!--" He rolled his eyes significantly. "But may I introduce my friend Angus Guest."

"You've introduced me already, Francesco," said Angus.

"So sorry," said Francis.

"Guest!" said Aaron.

Francis suddenly began to laugh.

"May he not be Guest?" he asked, fatherly.

"Very likely," said Aaron. "Not that I was ever good at guessing."

Francis tilted his eyebrows. Fortunately the waiter arrived with the coffee.

"Tell me," said Francis, "will you have your coffee black, or with milk?" He was determined to restore a tone of sobriety.

The coffee was sipped in sober solemnity.

"Is music your line as well, then?" asked Aaron.

"No, we're painters. We're going to work in Rome."

"To earn your living?"

"Not yet."

The amount of discretion, modesty, and reserve which Francis put into these two syllables gave Aaron to think that he had two real young swells to deal with.

"No," continued Francis. "I was only JUST down from Oxford when the war came--and Angus had been about ten months at the Slade--But I have

always painted.--So now we are going to work, really hard, in Rome, to make up for lost time.--Oh, one has lost so much time, in the war. And such PRECIOUS time! I don't know if ever one will even be able to make it up again." Francis tilted his handsome eyebrows and put his head on one side with a wise-distressed look.

"No," said Angus. "One will never be able to make it up. What is more, one will never be able to start again where one left off. We're shattered old men, now, in one sense. And in another sense, we're just pre-war babies."

The speech was uttered with an odd abruptness and didacticism which made Aaron open his eyes. Angus had that peculiar manner: he seemed to be haranguing himself in the circle of his own thoughts, not addressing himself to his listener.

So his listener listened on the outside edge of the young fellow's crowded thoughts. Francis put on a distressed air, and let his attention wander. Angus pursed his lips and his eyes were stretched wide with a kind of pleasure, like a wicked owl which has just joyfully hooted an ill omen.

"Tell me," said Francis to Aaron. "Where were YOU all the time during the war?"

"I was doing my job," said Aaron. Which led to his explaining his

origins.

"Really! So your music is quite new! But how interesting!" cried Francis.

Aaron explained further.

"And so the war hardly affected you? But what did you FEEL about it, privately?"

"I didn't feel much. I didn't know what to feel. Other folks did such a lot of feeling, I thought I'd better keep my mouth shut."

"Yes, quite!" said Angus. "Everybody had such a lot of feelings on somebody else's behalf, that nobody ever had time to realise what they felt themselves. I know I was like that. The feelings all came on to me from the outside: like flies settling on meat. Before I knew where I was I was eaten up with a swarm of feelings, and I found myself in the trenches. God knows what for. And ever since then I've been trying to get out of my swarm of feelings, which buzz in and out of me and have nothing to do with me. I realised it in hospital. It's exactly like trying to get out of a swarm of nasty dirty flies. And every one you kill makes you sick, but doesn't make the swarm any less."

Again Angus pursed and bridled and looked like a pleased, wicked white owl. Then he polished his monocle on a very choice silk handkerchief,

and fixed it unseeing in his left eye.

But Francis was not interested in his friend's experiences. For Francis had had a job in the War Office--whereas Angus was a war-hero with shattered nerves. And let him depreciate his own experiences as much as he liked, the young man with the monocle kept tight hold on his prestige as a war hero. Only for himself, though. He by no means insisted that anyone else should be war-bitten.

Francis was one of those men who, like women, can set up the sympathetic flow and make a fellow give himself away without realising what he is doing. So there sat our friend Aaron, amusingly unbosoming himself of all his history and experiences, drawn out by the arch, subtle attentiveness of the handsome Francis. Angus listened, too, with pleased amusedness on his pale, emaciated face, pursing his shrunken jaw. And Aaron sipped various glasses of the liqueur, and told all his tale as if it was a comedy. A comedy it seemed, too, at that hour. And a comedy no doubt it was. But mixed, like most things in this life. Mixed.

It was quite late before this seance broke up: and the waiter itching to get rid of the fellows.

"Well, now," said Francis, as he rose from the table and settled his elegant waist, resting on one hip, as usual. "We shall see you in the morning, I hope. You say you are going to Venice. Why? Have you some engagement in Venice?"

"No," said Aaron. "I only was going to look for a friend--Rawdon Lilly."

"Rawdon Lilly! Why, is he in Venice? Oh, I've heard SUCH a lot about him. I should like so much to meet him. But I heard he was in Germany--"

"I don't know where he is."

"Angus! Didn't we hear that Lilly was in Germany?"

"Yes, in Munich, being psychoanalysed, I believe it was."

Aaron looked rather blank.

"But have you anything to take you to Venice? It's such a bad climate in the winter. Why not come with us to Florence?" said Francis.

Aaron wavered. He really did not know what to do.

"Think about it," said Francis, laying his hand on Aaron's arm. "Think about it tonight. And we'll meet in the morning. At what time?"

"Any time," said Aaron.

"Well, say eleven. We'll meet in the lounge here at eleven. Will that suit you? All right, then. It's so awfully nice meeting you. That

marvellous flute.--And think about Florence. But do come. Don't disappoint us."

The two young men went elegantly upstairs.