CHAPTER XV. A RAILWAY JOURNEY

The next day but one, the three set off for Florence. Aaron had made an excursion from Milan with the two young heroes, and dined with them subsequently at the most expensive restaurant in the town. Then they had all gone home--and had sat in the young men's bedroom drinking tea, whilst Aaron played the flute. Francis was really musical, and enchanted. Angus enjoyed the novelty, and the moderate patronage he was able to confer. And Aaron felt amused and pleased, and hoped he was paying for his treat.

So behold them setting off for Florence in the early morning. Angus and Francis had first-class tickets: Aaron took a third-class.

"Come and have lunch with us on the train," said Angus. "I'll order three places, and we can lunch together."

"Oh, I can buy a bit of food at the station," said Aaron.

"No, come and lunch with us. It will be much nicer. And we shall enjoy it as well," said Angus.

"Of course! Ever so much nicer! Of course!" cried Francis. "Yes, why not, indeed! Why should you hesitate?"

"All right, then," said Aaron, not without some feeling of constraint.

So they separated. The young men settled themselves amidst the red plush and crochet-work, looking, with their hair plastered smoothly back, quite as first class as you could wish, creating quite the right impression on the porters and the travelling Italians. Aaron went to his third-class, further up the train.

"Well, then, au revoir, till luncheon," cried Francis.

The train was fairly full in the third and second classes. However, Aaron got his seat, and the porter brought on his bags, after disposing of the young men's luggage. Aaron gave the tip uneasily. He always hated tipping--it seemed humiliating both ways. And the airy aplomb of the two young cavaliers, as they settled down among the red plush and the obsequiousness, and said "Well, then, au revoir till luncheon," was peculiarly unsettling: though they did not intend it so.

"The porter thinks I'm their servant--their valet," said Aaron to himself, and a curious half-amused, half-contemptuous look flickered on his face. It annoyed him. The falsity occasioned by the difference in the price of the tickets was really humiliating. Aaron had lived long enough to know that as far as manhood and intellect went--nay, even education--he was not the inferior of the two young "gentlemen." He knew quite well that, as far as intrinsic nature went, they did not imagine him an inferior: rather the contrary. They had rather an exaggerated

respect for him and his life-power, and even his origin. And yet--they had the inestimable cash advantage--and they were going to keep it. They knew it was nothing more than an artificial cash superiority. But they gripped it all the more intensely. They were the upper middle classes. They were Eton and Oxford. And they were going to hang on to their privileges. In these days, it is a fool who abdicates before he's forced to. And therefore:

"Well, then--au revoir till luncheon."

They were being so awfully nice. And inwardly they were not condescending. But socially, they just had to be. The world is made like that. It wasn't their own private fault. It was no fault at all. It was just the mode in which they were educated, the style of their living. And as we know, le style, c'est l'homme.

Angus came of very wealthy iron people near Merthyr. Already he had a very fair income of his own. As soon as the law-business concerning his father's and his grandfather's will was settled, he would be well off. And he knew it, and valued himself accordingly. Francis was the son of a highly-esteemed barrister and politician of Sydney, and in his day would inherit his father's lately-won baronetcy. But Francis had not very much money: and was much more class-flexible than Angus. Angus had been born in a house with a park, and of awful, hard-willed, money-bound people. Francis came of a much more adventurous, loose, excitable family, he had the colonial newness and adaptability. He knew, for his own part, that

class superiority was just a trick, nowadays. Still, it was a trick that paid. And a trick he was going to play as long as it did pay.

While Aaron sat, a little pale at the gills, immobile, ruminating these matters, a not very pleasant look about his nose-end, he heard a voice:

"Oh, there you ARE! I thought I'd better come and see, so that we can fetch you at lunch time.--You've got a seat? Are you quite comfortable? Is there anything I could get you? Why, you're in a non-smoker!--But that doesn't matter, everybody will smoke. Are you sure you have everything? Oh, but wait just one moment--"

It was Francis, long and elegant, with his straight shoulders and his coat buttoned to show his waist, and his face so well-formed and so modern. So modern, altogether. His voice was pleasantly modulated, and never hurried. He now looked as if a thought had struck him. He put a finger to his brow, and hastened back to his own carriage. In a minute, he returned with a new London literary magazine.

"Something to read--I shall have to FLY--See you at lunch," and he had turned and elegantly hastened, but not too fast, back to his carriage. The porter was holding the door for him. So Francis looked pleasantly hurried, but by no means rushed. Oh, dear, no. He took his time. It was not for him to bolt and scramble like a mere Italian.

The people in Aaron's carriage had watched the apparition of the elegant

youth intently. For them, he was a being from another sphere--no doubt a young milordo with power wealth, and glamorous life behind him. Which was just what Francis intended to convey. So handsome--so very, very impressive in all his elegant calm showiness. He made such a bella figura. It was just what the Italians loved. Those in the first class regions thought he might even be an Italian, he was so attractive.

The train in motion, the many Italian eyes in the carriage studied Aaron. He, too, was good-looking. But by no means as fascinating as the young milordo. Not half as sympathetic. No good at all at playing a role. Probably a servant of the young signori.

Aaron stared out of the window, and played the one single British role left to him, that of ignoring his neighbours, isolating himself in their midst, and minding his own business. Upon this insular trick our greatness and our predominance depends--such as it is. Yes, they might look at him. They might think him a servant or what they liked. But he was inaccessible to them. He isolated himself upon himself, and there remained.

It was a lovely day, a lovely, lovely day of early autumn. Over the great plain of Lombardy a magnificent blue sky glowed like mid-summer, the sun shone strong. The great plain, with its great stripes of cultivation--without hedges or boundaries---how beautiful it was! Sometimes he saw oxen ploughing. Sometimes. Oh, so beautiful, teams of eight, or ten, even of twelve pale, great soft oxen in procession,

ploughing the dark velvety earth, a driver with a great whip at their head, a man far behind holding the plough-shafts. Beautiful the soft, soft plunging motion of oxen moving forwards. Beautiful the strange, snaky lifting of the muzzles, the swaying of the sharp horns. And the soft, soft crawling motion of a team of oxen, so invisible, almost, yet so inevitable. Now and again straight canals of water flashed blue. Now and again the great lines of grey-silvery poplars rose and made avenues or lovely grey airy quadrangles across the plain. Their top boughs were spangled with gold and green leaf. Sometimes the vine-leaves were gold and red, a patterning. And the great square farm-homesteads, white, red-roofed, with their out-buildings, stood naked amid the lands, without screen or softening. There was something big and exposed about it all. No more the cosy English ambushed life, no longer the cosy littleness of the landscape. A bigness--and nothing to shelter the unshrinking spirit. It was all exposed, exposed to the sweep of plain, to the high, strong sky, and to human gaze. A kind of boldness, an indifference. Aaron was impressed and fascinated. He looked with new interest at the Italians in the carriage with him--for this same boldness and indifference and exposed gesture. And he found it in them, too. And again it fascinated him. It seemed so much bigger, as if the walls of life had fallen. Nay, the walls of English life will have to fall.

Sitting there in the third-class carriage, he became happy again. The presence of his fellow-passengers was not so hampering as in England. In England, everybody seems held tight and gripped, nothing is left

free. Every passenger seems like a parcel holding his string as fast as he can about him, lest one corner of the wrapper should come undone and reveal what is inside. And every other passenger is forced, by the public will, to hold himself as tight-bound also. Which in the end becomes a sort of self-conscious madness.

But here, in the third class carriage, there was no tight string round every man. They were not all trussed with self-conscious string as tight as capons. They had a sufficient amount of callousness and indifference and natural equanimity. True, one of them spat continually on the floor, in large spits. And another sat with his boots all unlaced and his collar off, and various important buttons undone. They did not seem to care if bits of themselves did show, through the gaps in the wrapping. Aaron winced--but he preferred it to English tightness. He was pleased, he was happy with the Italians. He thought how generous and natural they were.

So the towns passed by, and the hours, and he seemed at last to have got outside himself and his old conditions. It seemed like a great escape. There was magic again in life--real magic. Was it illusion, or was it genuine? He thought it was genuine, and opened his soul a if there was no danger.

Lunch-time came. Francis summoned Aaron down the rocking tram. The three men had a table to themselves, and all felt they were enjoying themselves very much indeed. Of course Francis and Angus made a great

impression again. But in the dining car were mostly middle-class, well-to-do Italians. And these did not look upon our two young heroes as two young wonders. No, rather with some criticism, and some class-envy. But they were impressed. Oh, they were impressed! How should they not be, when our young gentlemen had such an air! Aaron was conscious all the time that the fellow-diners were being properly impressed by the flower of civilisation and the salt of the earth, namely, young, well-to-do Englishmen. And he had a faint premonition, based on experience perhaps, that fellow-passengers in the end never forgive the man who has "impressed" them. Mankind loves being impressed. It asks to be impressed. It almost forces those whom it can force to play a role and to make an impression. And afterwards, never forgives.

When the train ran into Bologna Station, they were still in the restaurant car. Nor did they go at once to their seats. Angus had paid the bill. There was three-quarters-of-an-hour's wait in Bologna.

"You may as well come down and sit with us," said Francis. "We've got nobody in our carriage, so why shouldn't we all stay together during the wait. You kept your own seat, I suppose."

No, he had forgotten. So when he went to look for it, it was occupied by a stout man who was just taking off his collar and wrapping a white kerchief round his neck. The third class carriages were packed. For those were early days after the war, while men still had pre-war notions and were poor. Ten months would steal imperceptibly by, and the

mysterious revolution would be effected. Then, the second class and the first class would be packed, indescribably packed, crowded, on all great trains: and the third class carriages, lo and behold, would be comparatively empty. Oh, marvellous days of bankruptcy, when nobody will condescend to travel third!

However, these were still modest, sombre months immediately after the peace. So a large man with a fat neck and a white kerchief, and his collar over his knee, sat in Aaron's seat. Aaron looked at the man, and at his own luggage overhead. The fat man saw him looking and stared back: then stared also at the luggage overhead: and with his almost invisible north-Italian gesture said much plainer than words would have said it: "Go to hell. I'm here and I'm going to stop here."

There was something insolent and unbearable about the look--and about the rocky fixity of the large man. He sat as if he had insolently taken root in his seat. Aaron flushed slightly. Francis and Angus strolled along the train, outside, for the corridor was already blocked with the mad Bologna rush, and the baggage belonging. They joined Aaron as he stood on the platform.

"But where is YOUR SEAT?" cried Francis, peering into the packed and jammed compartments of the third class.

"That man's sitting in it."

"Which?" cried Francis, indignant.

"The fat one there--with the collar on his knee."

"But it was your seat--!"

Francis' gorge rose in indignation. He mounted into the corridor. And in the doorway of the compartment he bridled like an angry horse rearing, bridling his head. Poising himself on one hip, he stared fixedly at the man with the collar on his knee, then at the baggage aloft. He looked down at the fat man as a bird looks down from the eaves of a house. But the man looked back with a solid, rock-like impudence, before which an Englishman quails: a jeering, immovable insolence, with a sneer round the nose and a solid-seated posterior.

"But," said Francis in English--none of them had any Italian yet. "But," said Francis, turning round to Aaron, "that was YOUR SEAT?" and he flung his long fore-finger in the direction of the fat man's thighs.

"Yes!" said Aaron.

"And he's TAKEN it--!" cried Francis in indignation.

"And knows it, too," said Aaron.

"But--!" and Francis looked round imperiously, as if to summon his

bodyguard. But bodyguards are no longer forthcoming, and train-guards are far from satisfactory. The fat man sat on, with a sneer-grin, very faint but very effective, round his nose, and a solidly-planted posterior. He quite enjoyed the pantomime of the young foreigners. The other passengers said something to him, and he answered laconic. Then they all had the faint sneer-grin round their noses. A woman in the corner grinned jeeringly straight in Francis' face. His charm failed entirely this time: and as for his commandingness, that was ineffectual indeed. Rage came up in him.

"Oh well--something must be done," said he decisively. "But didn't you put something in the seat to RESERVE it?"

"Only that New Statesman--but he's moved it."

The man still sat with the invisible sneer-grin on his face, and that peculiar and immovable plant of his Italian posterior.

"Mais--cette place etait RESERVEE--" said Francis, moving to the direct attack.

The man turned aside and ignored him utterly--then said something to the men opposite, and they all began to show their teeth in a grin.

Francis was not so easily foiled. He touched the man on the arm. The man looked round threateningly, as if he had been struck.

"Cette place est reservee--par ce Monsieur--" said Francis with hauteur, though still in an explanatory tone, and pointing to Aaron.

The Italian looked him, not in the eyes, but between the eyes, and sneered full in his face. Then he looked with contempt at Aaron. And then he said, in Italian, that there was room for such snobs in the first class, and that they had not any right to come occupying the place of honest men in the third.

"Gia! Gia!" barked the other passengers in the carriage.

"Loro possono andare prima classa--PRIMA CLASSA!" said the woman in the corner, in a very high voice, as if talking to deaf people, and pointing to Aaron's luggage, then along the train to the first class carriages.

"C'e posto la," said one of the men, shrugging his shoulders.

There was a jeering quality in the hard insolence which made Francis go very red and Augus very white. Angus stared like a death's-head behind his monocle, with death-blue eyes.

"Oh, never mind. Come along to the first class. I'll pay the difference. We shall be much better all together. Get the luggage down, Francis. It wouldn't be possible to travel with this lot, even if he gave up the seat. There's plenty of room in our carriage--and I'll pay the extra,"

said Angus.

He knew there was one solution--and only one--Money.

But Francis bit his finger. He felt almost beside himself--and quite powerless. For he knew the guard of the train would jeer too. It is not so easy to interfere with honest third-class Bolognesi in Bologna station, even if they have taken another man's seat. Powerless, his brow knitted, and looking just like Mephistopheles with his high forehead and slightly arched nose, Mephistopheles in a rage, he hauled down Aaron's bag and handed it to Angus. So they transferred themselves to the first-class carriage, while the fat man and his party in the third-class watched in jeering, triumphant silence. Solid, planted, immovable, in static triumph.

So Aaron sat with the others amid the red plush, whilst the train began its long slow climb of the Apennines, stinking sulphurous through tunnels innumerable. Wonderful the steep slopes, the great chestnut woods, and then the great distances glimpsed between the heights, Firenzuola away and beneath, Turneresque hills far off, built of heaven-bloom, not of earth. It was cold at the summit-station, ice and snow in the air, fierce. Our travellers shrank into the carriage again, and wrapped themselves round.

Then the train began its long slither downhill, still through a whole necklace of tunnels, which fortunately no longer stank. So down and

down, till the plain appears in sight once more, the Arno valley. But then began the inevitable hitch that always happens in Italian travel. The train began to hesitate--to falter to a halt, whistling shrilly as if in protest: whistling pip-pip-pip in expostulation as it stood forlorn among the fields: then stealing forward again and stealthily making pace, gathering speed, till it had got up a regular spurt: then suddenly the brakes came on with a jerk, more faltering to a halt, more whistling and pip-pip-pipping, as the engine stood jingling with impatience: after which another creak and splash, and another choking off. So on till they landed in Prato station: and there they sat. A fellow passenger told them, there was an hour to wait here: an hour. Something had happened up the line.

"Then I propose we make tea," said Angus, beaming.

"Why not! Of course. Let us make tea. And I will look for water."

So Aaron and Francis went to the restaurant bar and filled the little pan at the tap. Angus got down the red picnic case, of which he was so fond, and spread out the various arrangements on the floor of the coupe. He soon had the spirit-lamp burning, the water heating. Francis proposed that he and Aaron should dash into Prato and see what could be bought, whilst the tea was in preparation. So off they went, leaving Angus like a busy old wizard manipulating his arrangements on the floor of the carriage, his monocle beaming with bliss. The one fat fellow--passenger with a lurid striped rug over his knees watched with acute interest.

Everybody who passed the doorway stood to contemplate the scene with pleasure. Officials came and studied the situation with appreciation. Then Francis and Aaron returned with a large supply of roast chestnuts, piping hot, and hard dried plums, and good dried figs, and rather stale rusks. They found the water just boiling, Angus just throwing in the tea-egg, and the fellow-passenger just poking his nose right in, he was so thrilled.

Nothing pleased Angus so much as thus pitching camp in the midst of civilisation. The scrubby newspaper packets of chestnuts, plums, figs and rusks were spread out: Francis flew for salt to the man at the bar, and came back with a little paper of rock-salt: the brown tea was dispensed in the silver-fitted glasses from the immortal luncheon-case: and the picnic was in full swing. Angus, being in the height of his happiness, now sat on the seat cross-legged, with his feet under him, in the authentic Buddha fashion, and on his face the queer rapt alert look, half a smile, also somewhat Buddhistic, holding his glass of brown tea in his hand. He was as rapt and immobile as if he really were in a mystic state. Yet it was only his delight in the tea-party. The fellow-passenger peered at the tea, and said in broken French, was it good. In equally fragmentary French Francis said very good, and offered the fat passenger some. He, however, held up his hand in protest, as if to say not for any money would he swallow the hot-watery stuff. And he pulled out a flask of wine. But a handful of chestnuts he accepted.

The train-conductor, ticket-collector, and the heavy green soldier who

protected them, swung open the door and stared attentively. The fellow passenger addressed himself to these new-comers, and they all began to smile good-naturedly. Then the fellow-passenger--he was stout and fifty and had a brilliant striped rug always over his knees--pointed out the Buddha-like position of Angus, and the three in-starers smiled again. And so the fellow-passenger thought he must try too. So he put aside his rug, and lifted his feet from the floor, and took his toes in his hands, and tried to bring his legs up and his feet under him. But his knees were fat, his trousers in the direst extreme of peril, and he could no more manage it than if he had tried to swallow himself. So he desisted suddenly, rather scared, whilst the three bunched and official heads in the doorway laughed and jested at him, showing their teeth and teasing him. But on our gypsy party they turned their eyes with admiration. They loved the novelty and the fun. And on the thin, elegant Angus in his new London clothes, they looked really puzzled, as he sat there immobile, gleaming through his monocle like some Buddha going wicked, perched cross-legged and ecstatic on the red velvet seat. They marvelled that the lower half of him could so double up, like a foot-rule. So they stared till they had seen enough. When they suddenly said "Buon 'appetito," withdrew their heads and shoulders, slammed the door, and departed.

Then the train set off also--and shortly after six arrived in Florence. It was debated what should Aaron do in Florence. The young men had engaged a room at Bertolini's hotel, on the Lungarno. Bertolini's was not expensive--but Aaron knew that his friends would not long endure

hotel life. However, he went along with the other two, trusting to find a cheaper place on the morrow.

It was growing quite dark as they drove to the hotel, but still was light enough to show the river rustling, the Ponte Vecchio spanning its little storeys across the flood, on its low, heavy piers: and some sort of magic of the darkening, varied houses facing, on the other side of the stream. Of course they were all enchanted.

"I knew," said Francis, "we should love it."

Aaron was told he could have a little back room and pension terms for fifteen lire a day, if he stayed at least fifteen days. The exchange was then at forty-five. So fifteen lire meant just six-shillings-and-six pence a day, without extras. Extras meant wine, tea, butter, and light. It was decided he should look for something cheaper next day.

By the tone of the young men, he now gathered that they would prefer it if he took himself off to a cheaper place. They wished to be on their own.

"Well, then," said Francis, "you will be in to lunch here, won't you? Then we'll see you at lunch."

It was as if both the young men had drawn in their feelers now. They were afraid of finding the new man an incubus. They wanted to wash their

hands of him. Aaron's brow darkened.

"Perhaps it was right your love to dissemble
But why did you kick me down stairs?..."

Then morning found him out early, before his friends had arisen. It was sunny again. The magic of Florence at once overcame him, and he forgot the bore of limited means and hotel costs. He went straight out of the hotel door, across the road, and leaned on the river parapet. There ran the Arno: not such a flood after all, but a green stream with shoals of pebbles in its course. Across, and in the delicate shadow of the early sun, stood the opposite Lungarno, the old flat houses, pink, or white, or grey stone, with their green shutters, some closed, some opened. It had a flowery effect, the skyline irregular against the morning light. To the right the delicate Trinita bridge, to the left, the old bridge with its little shops over the river. Beyond, towards the sun, glimpses of green, sky-bloomed country: Tuscany.

There was a noise and clatter of traffic: boys pushing hand-barrows over the cobble-stones, slow bullocks stepping side by side, and shouldering one another affectionately, drawing a load of country produce, then horses in great brilliant scarlet cloths, like vivid palls, slowly pulling the long narrow carts of the district: and men hu-huing!--and people calling: all the sharp, clattering morning noise of Florence.

"Oh, Angus! Do come and look! OH, so lovely!"

Glancing up, he saw the elegant figure of Francis, in fine coloured-silk pyjamas, perched on a small upper balcony, turning away from the river towards the bedroom again, his hand lifted to his lips, as if to catch there his cry of delight. The whole pose was classic and effective: and very amusing. How the Italians would love it!

Aaron slipped back across the road, and walked away under the houses towards the Ponte Vecchio. He passed the bridge--and passed the Uffizi--watching the green hills opposite, and San Miniato. Then he noticed the over-dramatic group of statuary in the Piazza Mentana--male and physical and melodramatic--and then the corner house. It was a big old Florentine house, with many green shutters and wide eaves. There was a notice plate by the door--"Pension Nardini."

He came to a full stop. He stared at the notice-plate, stared at the glass door, and turning round, stared at the over-pathetic dead soldier on the arm of his over-heroic pistol-firing comrade; Mentana--and the date! Aaron wondered what and where Mentana was. Then at last he summoned his energy, opened the glass door, and mounted the first stairs.

He waited some time before anybody appeared. Then a maid-servant.

"Can I have a room?" said Aaron.

The bewildered, wild-eyed servant maid opened a door and showed him into a heavily-gilt, heavily-plush drawing-room with a great deal of frantic grandeur about it. There he sat and cooled his heels for half an hour. Arrived at length a stout young lady--handsome, with big dark-blue Italian eyes--but anaemic and too stout.

"Oh!" she said as she entered, not knowing what else to say.

"Good-morning," said Aaron awkwardly.

"Oh, good-morning! English! Yes! Oh, I am so sorry to keep you, you know, to make you wait so long. I was upstairs, you know, with a lady. Will you sit?"

"Can I have a room?" said Aaron.

"A room! Yes, you can."

"What terms?"

"Terms! Oh! Why, ten francs a day, you know, pension--if you stay--How long will you stay?"

"At least a month, I expect."

"A month! Oh yes. Yes, ten francs a day."

"For everything?"

"Everything. Yes, everything. Coffee, bread, honey or jam in the morning: lunch at half-past twelve; tea in the drawing-room, half-past four: dinner at half-past seven: all very nice. And a warm room with the sun--Would you like to see?"

So Aaron was led up the big, rambling old house to the top floor--then along a long old corridor--and at last into a big bedroom with two beds and a red tiled floor--a little dreary, as ever--but the sun just beginning to come in, and a lovely view on to the river, towards the Ponte Vecchio, and at the hills with their pines and villas and verdure opposite.

Here he would settle. The signorina would send a man for his bags, at half past two in the afternoon.

At luncheon Aaron found the two friends, and told them of his move.

"How very nice for you! Ten francs a day--but that is nothing. I am so pleased you've found something. And when will you be moving in?" said Francis.

"At half-past two."

"Oh, so soon. Yes, just as well.--But we shall see you from time to time, of course. What did you say the address was? Oh, yes--just near the awful statue. Very well. We can look you up any time--and you will find us here. Leave a message if we should happen not to be in--we've got lots of engagements--"