

CHAPTER XVII. HIGH UP OVER THE CATHEDRAL SQUARE

Aaron and Lilly sat in Argyle's little loggia, high up under the eaves of the small hotel, a sort of long attic-terrace just under the roof, where no one would have suspected it. It was level with the grey conical roof of the Baptistery. Here sat Aaron and Lilly in the afternoon, in the last of the lovely autumn sunshine. Below, the square was already cold in shadow, the pink and white and green Baptistery rose lantern-shaped as from some sea-shore, cool, cold and wan now the sun was gone. Black figures, innumerable black figures, curious because they were all on end, up on end--Aaron could not say why he expected them to be horizontal--little black figures upon end, like fishes that swim on their tails, wiggled endlessly across the piazza, little carriages on natural all-fours rattled tinily across, the yellow little tram-cars, like dogs slipped round the corner. The balcony was so high up, that the sound was ineffectual. The upper space, above the houses, was nearer than the under-currents of the noisy town. Sunlight, lovely full sunlight, lingered warm and still on the balcony. It caught the facade of the cathedral sideways, like the tips of a flower, and sideways lit up the stem of Giotto's tower, like a lily stem, or a long, lovely pale pink and white and green pistil of the lily of the cathedral. Florence, the flowery town. Firenze--Fiorenze--the flowery town: the red lilies. The Fiorentini, the flower-souled. Flowers with good roots in the mud and muck, as should be: and fearless blossoms in air, like the cathedral and the tower and the David.

"I love it," said Lilly. "I love this place, I love the cathedral and the tower. I love its pinkness and its paleness. The Gothic souls find fault with it, and say it is gimcrack and tawdry and cheap. But I love it, it is delicate and rosy, and the dark stripes are as they should be, like the tiger marks on a pink lily. It's a lily, not a rose; a pinky white lily with dark tigery marks. And heavy, too, in its own substance: earth-substance, risen from earth into the air: and never forgetting the dark, black-fierce earth--I reckon here men for a moment were themselves, as a plant in flower is for the moment completely itself. Then it goes off. As Florence has gone off. No flowers now. But it HAS flowered. And I don't see why a race should be like an aloe tree, flower once and die. Why should it? Why not flower again? Why not?"

"If it's going to, it will," said Aaron. "Our deciding about it won't alter it."

"The decision is part of the business."

Here they were interrupted by Argyle, who put his head through one of the windows. He had flecks of lather on his reddened face.

"Do you think you're wise now," he said, "to sit in that sun?"

"In November?" laughed Lilly.

"Always fear the sun when there's an 'r' in the month," said Argyle.

"Always fear it 'r' or no 'r,' I say. I'm frightened of it. I've been in the South, I know what it is. I tell you I'm frightened of it. But if you think you can stand it--well--"

"It won't last much longer, anyhow," said Lilly.

"Too long for me, my boy. I'm a shady bird, in all senses of the word, in all senses of the word.--Now are you comfortable? What? Have another cushion? A rug for your knees? You're quite sure now? Well, wait just one moment till the waiter brings up a syphon, and you shall have a whiskey and soda. Precious--oh, yes, very precious these days--like drinking gold. Thirty-five lire a bottle, my boy!" Argyle pulled a long face, and made a noise with his lips. "But I had this bottle given me, and luckily you've come while there's a drop left. Very glad you have! Very glad you have."

Here he poked a little table through the window, and put a bottle and two glasses, one a tooth-glass, upon it. Then he withdrew again to finish shaving. The waiter presently hobbled up with the syphon and third glass. Argyle pushed his head through the window, that was only a little higher than the balcony. He was soon neatly shaved, and was brushing his hair.

"Go ahead, my boys, go ahead with that whiskey!" he said.

"We'll wait for you," said Lilly.

"No, no, don't think of it. However, if you will, I shall be one minute only--one minute only. I'll put on the water for the tea now. Oh, damned bad methylated spirit they sell now! And six francs a litre! Six francs a litre! I don't know what I'm going to do, the air I breathe costs money nowadays--Just one moment and I'll be with you! Just one moment--"

In a very little while he came from the tiny attic bedroom, through the tiniest cupboard of a sitting-room under the eaves, where his books were, and where he had hung his old red India tapestries--or silk embroideries--and he emerged there up above the world on the loggia.

"Now then--siamo nel paradiso, eh? Paradisal enough for you, is it?"

"The devil looking over Lincoln," said Lilly laughing, glancing up into Argyle's face.

"The devil looking over Florence would feel sad," said Argyle. "The place is fast growing respectable--Oh, piety makes the devil chuckle. But respectability, my boy, argues a serious diminution of spunk. And when the spunk diminishes we-ell--it's enough to make the most sturdy devil look sick. What? No doubt about it, no doubt whatever--There--!" he had just finished settling his tie and buttoning his waistcoat. "How do I look, eh? Presentable?--I've just had this suit turned. Clever little tailor across the way there. But he charged me a hundred and

twenty francs." Argyle pulled a face, and made the little trumping noise with his lips. "However--not bad, is it?--He had to let in a bit at the back of the waistcoat, and a gusset, my boy, a gusset--in the trousers back. Seems I've grown in the arsal region. Well, well, might do worse.--Is it all right?"

Lilly eyed the suit.

"Very nice. Very nice indeed. Such a good cloth! That makes all the difference."

"Oh, my dear fellow, all the difference! This suit is eleven years old--eleven years old. But beautiful English cloth--before the war, before the war!"

"It looks quite wonderfully expensive and smart now," said Lilly.

"Expensive and smart, eh! Ha-ha-ha! Well, it cost me a hundred and twenty francs to have it turned, and I found that expensive enough. Well, now, come--" here Argyle's voice took on a new gay cheer. "A whiskey and soda, Lilly? Say when! Oh, nonsense, nonsense! You're going to have double that. You're no lily of the valley here, remember. Not with me. Not likely. Siamo nel paradiso, remember."

"But why should we drink your whiskey? Tea would do for us just as well."

"Not likely! Not likely! When I have the pleasure of your company, my boy, we drink a glass of something, unless I am utterly stripped. Say when, Aaron."

"When," said Aaron.

Argyle at last seated himself heavily in a small chair. The sun had left the loggia, but was glowing still on Giotto's tower and the top of the cathedral facade, and on the remoter great red-tiled dome.

"Look at my little red monthly rose," said Argyle. "Wonderful little fellow! I wouldn't have anything happen to him for the world. Oh, a bacchic little chap. I made Pasquale wear a wreath of them on his hair. Very becoming they were, very.--Oh, I've had a charming show of flowers. Wonderful creatures sunflowers are." They got up and put their heads over the balcony, looking down on the square below. "Oh, great fun, great fun.--Yes, I had a charming show of flowers, charming.--Zinnias, petunias, ranunculus, sunflowers, white stocks--oh, charming. Look at that bit of honeysuckle. You see the berries where his flowers were! Delicious scent, I assure you."

Under the little balcony wall Argyle had put square red-tiled pots, all round, and in these still bloomed a few pansies and asters, whilst in a corner a monthly rose hung flowers like round blood-drops. Argyle was as tidy and scrupulous in his tiny rooms and his balcony as if he were a

first-rate sea-man on a yacht. Lilly remarked on this.

"Do you see signs of the old maid coming out in me? Oh, I don't doubt it. I don't doubt it. We all end that way. Age makes old maids of us all. And Tanny is all right, you say? Bring her to see me. Why didn't she come today?"

"You know you don't like people unless you expect them."

"Oh, but my dear fellow!--You and Tanny; you'd be welcome if you came at my busiest moment. Of course you would. I'd be glad to see you if you interrupted me at any crucial moment.--I am alone now till August. Then we shall go away together somewhere. But you and Tanny; why, there's the world, and there's Lilly: that's how I put it, my boy."

"All right, Argyle.--Hoflichkeiten."

"What? Gar keine Hoflichkeiten. Wahrhaftiger Kerl bin ich.--When am I going to see Tanny? When are you coming to dine with me?"

"After you've dined with us--say the day after tomorrow."

"Right you are. Delighted--. Let me look if that water's boiling."

He got up and poked half himself inside the bedroom. "Not yet. Damned filthy methylated spirit they sell."

"Look," said Lilly. "There's Del Torre!"

"Like some sort of midge, in that damned grey-and-yellow uniform. I can't stand it, I tell you. I can't stand the sight of any more of these uniforms. Like a blight on the human landscape. Like a blight. Like green-flies on rose-trees, smother-flies. Europe's got the smother-fly in these infernal shoddy militarists."

"Del Torre's coming out of it as soon as he can," said Lilly.

"I should think so, too."

"I like him myself--very much. Look, he's seen us! He wants to come up, Argyle."

"What, in that uniform! I'll see him in his grandmother's crinoline first."

"Don't be fanatical, it's bad taste. Let him come up a minute."

"Not for my sake. But for yours, he shall," Argyle stood at the parapet of the balcony and waved his arm. "Yes, come up," he said, "come up, you little mistkafer--what the Americans call a bug. Come up and be damned."

Of course Del Torre was too far off to hear this exhortation. Lilly also waved to him--and watched him pass into the doorway far below.

"I'll rinse one of these glasses for him," said Argyle.

The Marchese's step was heard on the stone stairs: then his knock.

"Come in! Come in!" cried Argyle from the bedroom, where he was rinsing the glass. The Marchese entered, grinning with his curious, half courteous greeting. "Go through--go through," cried Argyle. "Go on to the loggia--and mind your head. Good heavens, mind your head in that doorway."

The Marchese just missed the top of the doorway as he climbed the abrupt steps on to the loggia.--There he greeted Lilly and Aaron with hearty handshakes.

"Very glad to see you--very glad, indeed!" he cried, grinning with excited courtesy and pleasure, and covering Lilly's hand with both his own gloved hands. "When did you come to Florence?"

There was a little explanation. Argyle shoved the last chair--it was a luggage stool--through the window.

"All I can do for you in the way of a chair," he said.

"Ah, that is all right," said the Marchese. "Well, it is very nice up here--and very nice company. Of the very best, the very best in

Florence."

"The highest, anyhow," said Argyle grimly, as he entered with the glass.

"Have a whiskey and soda, Del Torre. It's the bottom of the bottle, as you see."

"The bottom of the bottle! Then I start with the tail-end, yes!" He stretched his blue eyes so that the whites showed all round, and grinned a wide, gnome-like grin.

"You made that start long ago, my dear fellow. Don't play the ingenue with me, you know it won't work. Say when, my man, say when!"

"Yes, when," said Del Torre. "When did I make that start, then?"

"At some unmentionably young age. Chickens such as you soon learn to cheep."

"Chickens such as I soon learn to cheap," repeated Del Torre, pleased with the verbal play. "What is cheap, please? What is TO CHEAP?"

"Cheep! Cheep!" squeaked Argyle, making a face at the little Italian, who was perched on one strap of the luggage-stool. "It's what chickens say when they're poking their little noses into new adventures--naughty ones."

"Are chickens naughty? Oh! I thought they could only be good!"

"Featherless chickens like yourself, my boy."

"Oh, as for featherless--then there is no saying what they will do.--"

And here the Marchese turned away from Argyle with the inevitable question to Lilly:

"Well, and how long will you stay in Florence?"

Lilly did not know: but he was not leaving immediately.

"Good! Then you will come and see us at once...."

Argyle rose once more, and went to make the tea. He shoved a lump of cake--or rather panetone, good currant loaf--through the window, with a knife to cut it.

"Help yourselves to the panetone," he said. "Eat it up. The tea is coming at once. You'll have to drink it in your glasses, there's only one old cup."

The Marchese cut the cake, and offered pieces. The two men took and ate.

"So you have already found Mr. Sisson!" said Del Torre to Lilly.

"Ran straight into him in the Via Nazionale," said Lilly.

"Oh, one always runs into everybody in Florence. We are all already acquainted: also with the flute. That is a great pleasure."

"So I think.--Does your wife like it, too?"

"Very much, indeed! She is quite eprise. I, too, shall have to learn to play it."

"And run the risk of spoiling the shape of your mouth--like Alcibiades."

"Is there a risk? Yes! Then I shan't play it. My mouth is too beautiful.--But Mr. Sisson has not spoilt his mouth."

"Not yet," said Lilly. "Give him time."

"Is he also afraid--like Alcibiades?"

"Are you, Aaron?" said Lilly.

"What?"

"Afraid of spoiling your beauty by screwing your mouth to the flute?"

"I look a fool, do I, when I'm playing?" said Aaron.

"Only the least little bit in the world," said Lilly. "The way you prance your head, you know, like a horse."

"Ah, well," said Aaron. "I've nothing to lose."

"And were you surprised, Lilly, to find your friend here?" asked Del Torre.

"I ought to have been. But I wasn't really."

"Then you expected him?"

"No. It came naturally, though.--But why did you come, Aaron? What exactly brought you?"

"Accident," said Aaron.

"Ah, no! No! There is no such thing as accident," said the Italian. "A man is drawn by his fate, where he goes."

"You are right," said Argyle, who came now with the teapot. "A man is drawn--or driven. Driven, I've found it. Ah, my dear fellow, what is life but a search for a friend? A search for a friend--that sums it up."

"Or a lover," said the Marchese, grinning.

"Same thing. Same thing. My hair is white--but that is the sum of my whole experience. The search for a friend." There was something at once real and sentimental in Argyle's tone.

"And never finding?" said Lilly, laughing.

"Oh, what would you? Often finding. Often finding. And losing, of course.--A life's history. Give me your glass. Miserable tea, but nobody has sent me any from England--"

"And you will go on till you die, Argyle?" said Lilly. "Always seeking a friend--and always a new one?"

"If I lose the friend I've got. Ah, my dear fellow, in that case I shall go on seeking. I hope so, I assure you. Something will be very wrong with me, if ever I sit friendless and make no search."

"But, Argyle, there is a time to leave off."

"To leave off what, to leave off what?"

"Having friends: or a friend, rather: or seeking to have one."

"Oh, no! Not at all, my friend. Not at all! Only death can make an end of that, my friend. Only death. And I should say, not even death. Not

even death ends a man's search for a friend. That is my belief. You may hang me for it, but I shall never alter."

"Nay," said Lilly. "There is a time to love, and a time to leave off loving."

"All I can say to that is that my time to leave off hasn't come yet," said Argyle, with obstinate feeling.

"Ah, yes, it has. It is only a habit and an idea you stick to."

"Indeed, it is no such thing. Indeed, it is no such thing. It is a profound desire and necessity: and what is more, a belief."

"An obstinate persistency, you mean," said Lilly.

"Well, call it so if it pleases you. It is by no means so to me." There was a brief pause. The sun had left the cathedral dome and the tower, the sky was full of light, the square swimming in shadow.

"But can a man live," said the Marchese, "without having something he lives for: something he wishes for, or longs for, and tries that he may get?"

"Impossible! Completely impossible!" said Argyle. "Man is a seeker, and except as such, he has no significance, no importance."

"He bores me with his seeking," said Lilly. "He should learn to possess himself--to be himself--and keep still."

"Ay, perhaps so," said Aaron. "Only--"

"But my dear boy, believe me, a man is never himself save in the supreme state of love: or perhaps hate, too, which amounts to the same thing. Never really himself.--Apart from this he is a tram-driver or a money-shoveller or an idea-machine. Only in the state of love is he really a man, and really himself. I say so, because I know," said Argyle.

"Ah, yes. That is one side of the truth. It is quite true, also. But it is just as true to say, that a man is never less himself, than in the supreme state of love. Never less himself, than then."

"Maybe! Maybe! But what could be better? What could be better than to lose oneself with someone you love, entirely, and so find yourself. Ah, my dear fellow, that is my creed, that is my creed, and you can't shake me in it. Never in that. Never in that."

"Yes, Argyle," said Lilly. "I know you're an obstinate love-apostle."

"I am! I am! And I have certain standards, my boy, and certain ideals which I never transgress. Never transgress. And never abandon."

"All right, then, you are an incurable love-maker."

"Pray God I am," said Argyle.

"Yes," said the Marchese. "Perhaps we are all so. What else do you give? Would you have us make money? Or do you give the centre of your spirit to your work? How is it to be?"

"I don't vitally care either about money or my work or--" Lilly faltered.

"Or what, then?"

"Or anything. I don't really care about anything. Except that--"

"You don't care about anything? But what is that for a life?" cried the Marchese, with a hollow mockery.

"What do YOU care for?" asked Lilly.

"Me? I care for several things. I care for my wife. I care for love. And I care to be loved. And I care for some pleasures. And I care for music. And I care for Italy."

"You are well off for cares," said Lilly.

"And you seem to me so very poor," said Del Torre.

"I should say so--if he cares for nothing," interjaculated Argyle. Then he clapped Lilly on the shoulder with a laugh. "Ha! Ha! Ha!--But he only says it to tease us," he cried, shaking Lilly's shoulder. "He cares more than we do for his own way of loving. Come along, don't try and take us in. We are old birds, old birds," said Argyle. But at that moment he seemed a bit doddering.

"A man can't live," said the Italian, "without an object."

"Well--and that object?" said Lilly.

"Well--it may be many things. Mostly it is two things.--love, and money. But it may be many things: ambition, patriotism, science, art--many things. But it is some objective. Something outside the self. Perhaps many things outside the self."

"I have had only one objective all my life," said Argyle. "And that was love. For that I have spent my life."

"And the lives of a number of other people, too," said Lilly.

"Admitted. Oh, admitted. It takes two to make love: unless you're a miserable--"

"Don't you think," said Aaron, turning to Lilly, "that however you try to get away from it, if you're not after money, and can't fit yourself into a job--you've got to, you've got to try and find something else--somebody else--somebody. You can't really be alone."

"No matter how many mistakes you've made--you can't really be alone--?" asked Lilly.

"You can be alone for a minute. You can be alone just in that minute when you've broken free, and you feel heart thankful to be alone, because the other thing wasn't to be borne. But you can't keep on being alone. No matter how many times you've broken free, and feel, thank God to be alone (nothing on earth is so good as to breathe fresh air and be alone), no matter how many times you've felt this--it wears off every time, and you begin to look again--and you begin to roam round. And even if you won't admit it to yourself, still you are seeking--seeking. Aren't you? Aren't you yourself seeking?"

"Oh, that's another matter," put in Argyle. "Lilly is happily married and on the shelf. With such a fine woman as Tanny I should think so--RATHER! But his is an exceptional nature, and an exceptional case. As for me, I made a hell of my marriage, and I swear it nearly sent me to hell. But I didn't forswear love, when I forswore marriage and woman. Not by ANY means."

"Are you not seeking any more, Lilly?" asked the Marchese. "Do you seek nothing?"

"We married men who haven't left our wives, are we supposed to seek anything?" said Lilly. "Aren't we perfectly satisfied and in bliss with the wonderful women who honour us as wives?"

"Ah, yes, yes!" said the Marchese. "But now we are not speaking to the world. Now we try to speak of that which we have in our centre of our hearts."

"And what have we there?" said Lilly.

"Well--shall I say? We have unrest. We have another need. We have something that hurts and eats us, yes, eats us inside. Do I speak the truth?"

"Yes. But what is the something?"

"I don't know. I don't know. But it is something in love, I think. It is love itself which gnaws us inside, like a cancer," said the Italian.

"But why should it? Is that the nature of love?" said Lilly.

"I don't know. Truly. I don't know.--But perhaps it is in the nature of love--I don't know.--But I tell you, I love my wife--she is very dear

to me. I admire her, I trust her, I believe her. She is to me much more than any woman, more even than my mother.--And so, I am very happy. I am very happy, she is very happy, in our love and our marriage.--But wait. Nothing has changed--the love has not changed: it is the same.--And yet we are NOT happy. No, we are not happy. I know she is not happy, I know I am not--"

"Why should you be?" said Lilly.

"Yes--and it is not even happiness," said the Marchese, screwing up his face in a painful effort of confession. "It is not even happiness. No, I do not ask to be happy. Why should I? It is childish--but there is for both of us, I know it, something which bites us, which eats us within, and drives us, drives us, somewhere, we don't know where. But it drives us, and eats away the life--and yet we love each other, and we must not separate--Do you know what I mean? Do you understand me at all in what I say? I speak what is true."

"Yes, I understand. I'm in the same dilemma myself.--But what I want to hear, is WHY you think it is so. Why is it?"

"Shall I say what I think? Yes? And you can tell me if it is foolish to you.--Shall I tell you? Well. Because a woman, she now first wants the man, and he must go to her because he is wanted. Do you understand?--You know--supposing I go to a woman--supposing she is my wife--and I go to her, yes, with my blood all ready, because it is I who want. Then she

puts me off. Then she says, not now, not now, I am tired, I am not well. I do not feel like it. She puts me off--till I am angry or sorry or whatever I am--but till my blood has gone down again, you understand, and I don't want her any more. And then she puts her arms round me, and caresses me, and makes love to me--till she rouses me once more. So, and so she rouses me--and so I come to her. And I love her, it is very good, very good. But it was she who began, it was her initiative, you know.--I do not think, in all my life, my wife has loved me from my initiative, you know. She will yield to me--because I insist, or because she wants to be a good submissive wife who loves me. So she will yield to me. But ah, what is it, you know? What is it a woman who allows me, and who has no answer? It is something worse than nothing--worse than nothing. And so it makes me very discontented and unbelieving.--If I say to her, she says it is not true--not at all true. Then she says, all she wants is that I should desire her, that I should love her and desire her. But even that is putting her will first. And if I come to her so, if I come to her of my own desire, then she puts me off. She puts me off, or she only allows me to come to her. Even now it is the same after ten years, as it was at first. But now I know, and for many years I did not know--"

The little man was intense. His face was strained, his blue eyes so stretched that they showed the whites all round. He gazed into Lilly's face.

"But does it matter?" said Lilly slowly, "in which of you the desire initiates? Isn't the result the same?"

"It matters. It matters--" cried the Marchese.

"Oh, my dear fellow, how MUCH it matters--" interrupted Argyle sagely.

"Ay!" said Aaron.

The Marchese looked from one to the other of them.

"It matters!" he cried. "It matters life or death. It used to be, that desire started in the man, and the woman answered. It used to be so for a long time in Italy. For this reason the women were kept away from the men. For this reason our Catholic religion tried to keep the young girls in convents, and innocent, before marriage. So that with their minds they should not know, and should not start this terrible thing, this woman's desire over a man, beforehand. This desire which starts in a woman's head, when she knows, and which takes a man for her use, for her service. This is Eve. Ah, I hate Eve. I hate her, when she knows, and when she WILLS. I hate her when she will make of me that which serves her desire.--She may love me, she may be soft and kind to me, she may give her life for me. But why? Only because I am HERS. I am that thing which does her most intimate service. She can see no other in me. And I may be no other to her--"

"Then why not let it be so, and be satisfied?" said Lilly.

"Because I cannot. I cannot. I would. But I cannot. The Borghesia--the citizens--the bourgeoisie, they are the ones who can. Oh, yes. The bourgeoisie, the shopkeepers, these serve their wives so, and their wives love them. They are the marital maquereaux--the husband-maquereau, you know. Their wives are so stout and happy, and they dote on their husbands and always betray them. So it is with the bourgeoise. She loves her husband so much, and is always seeking to betray him. Or she is a Madame Bovary, seeking for a scandal. But the bourgeois husband, he goes on being the same. He is the horse, and she the driver. And when she says gee-up, you know--then he comes ready, like a hired maquereau. Only he feels so good, like a good little boy at her breast. And then there are the nice little children. And so they keep the world going.--But for me--" he spat suddenly and with frenzy on the floor.

"You are quite right, my boy," said Argyle. "You are quite right. They've got the start of us, the women: and we've got to canter when they say gee-up. I--oh, I went through it all. But I broke the shafts and smashed the matrimonial cart, I can tell you, and I didn't care whether I smashed her up along with it or not. I didn't care one single bit, I assure you.--And here I am. And she is dead and buried these dozen years. Well--well! Life, you know, life. And women oh, they are the very hottest hell once they get the start of you. There's NOTHING they won't do to you, once they've got you. Nothing they won't do to you. Especially if they love you. Then you may as well give up the ghost: or smash the cart behind you, and her in it. Otherwise she will just harry you into submission, and make a dog of you, and cuckold you

under your nose. And you'll submit. Oh, you'll submit, and go on calling her my darling. Or else, if you won't submit, she'll do for you. Your only chance is to smash the shafts, and the whole matrimonial cart. Or she'll do for you. For a woman has an uncanny, hellish strength--she's a she-bear and a wolf, is a woman when she's got the start of you. Oh, it's a terrible experience, if you're not a bourgeois, and not one of the knuckling-under money-making sort."

"Knuckling-under sort. Yes. That is it," said the Marchese.

"But can't there be a balancing of wills?" said Lilly.

"My dear boy, the balance lies in that, that when one goes up, the other goes down. One acts, the other takes. It is the only way in love--And the women are nowadays the active party. Oh, yes, not a shadow of doubt about it. They take the initiative, and the man plays up. That's how it is. The man just plays up.--Nice manly proceeding, what!" cried Argyle.

"But why can't man accept it as the natural order of things?" said Lilly. "Science makes it the natural order."

"All my ---- to science," said Argyle. "No man with one drop of real spunk in him can stand it long."

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" cried the Italian. "Most men want it so. Most men want only, that a woman shall want them, and they shall then play up to her

when she has roused them. Most men want only this: that a woman shall choose one man out, to be her man, and he shall worship her and come up when she shall provoke him. Otherwise he is to keep still. And the woman, she is quite sure of her part. She must be loved and adored, and above all, obeyed, particularly in her sex desire. There she must not be thwarted, or she becomes a devil. And if she is obeyed, she becomes a misunderstood woman with nerves, looking round for the next man whom she can bring under. So it is."

"Well," said Lilly. "And then what?"

"Nay," interrupted Aaron. "But do you think it's true what he says? Have you found it like that? You're married. Has your experience been different, or the same?"

"What was yours?" asked Lilly.

"Mine was the same. Mine was the same, if ever it was," said Aaron.

"And mine was EXTREMELY similar," said Argyle with a grimace.

"And yours, Lilly?" asked the Marchese anxiously.

"Not very different," said Lilly.

"Ah!" cried Del Torre, jerking up erect as if he had found something.

"And what's your way out?" Aaron asked him.

"I'm not out--so I won't holloa," said Lilly. "But Del Torre puts it best.--What do you say is the way out, Del Torre?"

"The way out is that it should change: that the man should be the asker and the woman the answerer. It must change."

"But it doesn't. Prrrr!" Argyle made his trumpeting noise.

"Does it?" asked Lilly of the Marchese.

"No. I think it does not."

"And will it ever again?"

"Perhaps never."

"And then what?"

"Then? Why then man seeks a pis-aller. Then he seeks something which will give him answer, and which will not only draw him, draw him, with a terrible sexual will.--So he seeks young girls, who know nothing, and so cannot force him. He thinks he will possess them while they are young, and they will be soft and responding to his wishes.--But in this, too,

he is mistaken. Because now a baby of one year, if it be a female, is like a woman of forty, so is its will made up, so it will force a man."

"And so young girls are no good, even as a pis-aller."

"No good--because they are all modern women. Every one, a modern woman. Not one who isn't."

"Terrible thing, the modern woman," put in Argyle.

"And then--?"

"Then man seeks other forms of loves, always seeking the loving response, you know, of one gentler and tenderer than himself, who will wait till the man desires, and then will answer with full love.--But it is all pis-aller, you know."

"Not by any means, my boy," cried Argyle.

"And then a man naturally loves his own wife, too, even if it is not bearable to love her."

"Or one leaves her, like Aaron," said Lilly.

"And seeks another woman, so," said the Marchese.

"Does he seek another woman?" said Lilly. "Do you, Aaron?"

"I don't WANT to," said Aaron. "But--I can't stand by myself in the middle of the world and in the middle of people, and know I am quite by myself, and nowhere to go, and nothing to hold on to. I can for a day or two--But then, it becomes unbearable as well. You get frightened. You feel you might go funny--as you would if you stood on this balcony wall with all the space beneath you."

"Can't one be alone--quite alone?" said Lilly.

"But no--it is absurd. Like Saint Simeon Stylites on a pillar. But it is absurd!" cried the Italian.

"I don't mean like Simeon Stylites. I mean can't one live with one's wife, and be fond of her: and with one's friends, and enjoy their company: and with the world and everything, pleasantly: and yet KNOW that one is alone? Essentially, at the very core of me, alone. Eternally alone. And choosing to be alone. Not sentimental or LONELY. Alone, choosing to be alone, because by one's own nature one is alone. The being with another person is secondary," said Lilly.

"One is alone," said Argyle, "in all but love. In all but love, my dear fellow. And then I agree with you."

"No," said Lilly, "in love most intensely of all, alone."

"Completely incomprehensible," said Argyle. "Amounts to nothing."

"One man is but a part. How can he be so alone?" said the Marchese.

"In so far as he is a single individual soul, he IS alone--ipso facto. In so far as I am I, and only I am I, and I am only I, in so far, I am inevitably and eternally alone, and it is my last blessedness to know it, and to accept it, and to live with this as the core of my self-knowledge."

"My dear boy, you are becoming metaphysical, and that is as bad as softening of the brain," said Argyle.

"All right," said Lilly.

"And," said the Marchese, "it may be so by REASON. But in the heart--? Can the heart ever beat quite alone? Plop! Plop!--Can the heart beat quite alone, alone in all the atmosphere, all the space of the universe? Plop! Plop! Plop!--Quite alone in all the space?" A slow smile came over the Italian's face. "It is impossible. It may eat against the heart of other men, in anger, all in pressure against the others. It may beat hard, like iron, saying it is independent. But this is only beating against the heart of mankind, not alone.--But either with or against the heart of mankind, or the heart of someone, mother, wife, friend, children--so must the heart of every man beat. It is so."

"It beats alone in its own silence," said Lilly.

The Italian shook his head.

"We'd better be going inside, anyhow," said Argyle. "Some of you will be taking cold."

"Aaron," said Lilly. "Is it true for you?"

"Nearly," said Aaron, looking into the quiet, half-amused, yet frightening eyes of the other man. "Or it has been."

"A miss is as good as a mile," laughed Lilly, rising and picking up his chair to take it indoors. And the laughter of his voice was so like a simple, deliberate amiability, that Aaron's heart really stood still for a second. He knew that Lilly was alone--as far as he, Aaron, was concerned. Lilly was alone--and out of his isolation came his words, indifferent as to whether they came or not. And he left his friends utterly to their own choice. Utterly to their own choice. Aaron felt that Lilly was there, existing in life, yet neither asking for connection nor preventing any connection. He was present, he was the real centre of the group. And yet he asked nothing of them, and he imposed nothing. He left each to himself, and he himself remained just himself: neither more nor less. And there was a finality about it, which was at once maddening and fascinating. Aaron felt angry, as if he were

half insulted by the other man's placing the gift of friendship or connection so quietly back in the giver's hands. Lilly would receive no gift of friendship in equality. Neither would he violently refuse it. He let it lie unmarked. And yet at the same time Aaron knew that he could depend on the other man for help, nay, almost for life itself--so long as it entailed no breaking of the intrinsic isolation of Lilly's soul. But this condition was also hateful. And there was also a great fascination in it.