CHAPTER XVIII. THE MARCHESA

So Aaron dined with the Marchesa and Manfredi. He was quite startled when his hostess came in: she seemed like somebody else. She seemed like a demon, her hair on her brows, her terrible modern elegance. She wore a wonderful gown of thin blue velvet, of a lovely colour, with some kind of gauzy gold-threaded filament down the sides. It was terribly modern, short, and showed her legs and her shoulders and breast and all her beautiful white arms. Round her throat was a collar of dark-blue sapphires. Her hair was done low, almost to the brows, and heavy, like an Aubrey Beardsley drawing. She was most carefully made up--yet with that touch of exaggeration, lips slightly too red, which was quite intentional, and which frightened Aaron. He thought her wonderful, and sinister. She affected him with a touch of horror. She sat down opposite him, and her beautifully shapen legs, in frail, goldish stockings, seemed to glisten metallic naked, thrust from out of the wonderful, wonderful skin, like periwinkle-blue velvet. She had tapestry shoes, blue and gold: and almost one could see her toes: metallic naked. The gold-threaded gauze slipped at her side. Aaron could not help watching the naked-seeming arch of her foot. It was as if she were dusted with dark gold-dust upon her marvellous nudity.

She must have seen his face, seen that he was ebloui.

"You brought the flute?" she said, in that toneless, melancholy,

unstriving voice of hers. Her voice alone was the same: direct and bare and quiet.

"Yes."

"Perhaps I shall sing later on, if you'll accompany me. Will you?"

"I thought you hated accompaniments."

"Oh, no--not just unison. I don't mean accompaniment. I mean unison. I don't know how it will be. But will you try?"

"Yes, I'll try."

"Manfredi is just bringing the cocktails. Do you think you'd prefer orange in yours?"

"Ill have mine as you have yours."

"I don't take orange in mine. Won't you smoke?"

The strange, naked, remote-seeming voice! And then the beautiful firm limbs thrust out in that dress, and nakedly dusky as with gold-dust. Her beautiful woman's legs, slightly glistening, duskily. His one abiding instinct was to touch them, to kiss them. He had never known a woman to exercise such power over him. It was a bare, occult force, something he

could not cope with.

Manfredi came in with the little tray. He was still in uniform.

"Hello!" cried the little Italian. "Glad to see you--well, everything all right? Glad to hear it. How is the cocktail, Nan?"

"Yes," she said. "All right."

"One drop too much peach, eh?"

"No, all right."

"Ah," and the little officer seated himself, stretching his gaitered legs as if gaily. He had a curious smiling look on his face, that Aaron thought also diabolical--and almost handsome. Suddenly the odd, laughing, satanic beauty of the little man was visible.

"Well, and what have you been doing with yourself?" said he. "What did you do yesterday?"

"Yesterday?" said Aaron. "I went to the Uffizi."

"To the Uffizi? Well! And what did you think of it?"

"Very fine."

"I think it is. I think it is. What pictures did you look at?"

"I was with Dekker. We looked at most, I believe."

"And what do you remember best?"

"I remember Botticelli's Venus on the Shell."

"Yes! Yes!--" said Manfredi. "I like her. But I like others better. You thought her a pretty woman, yes?"

"No--not particularly pretty. But I like her body. And I like the fresh air. I like the fresh air, the summer sea-air all through it--through her as well."

"And her face?" asked the Marchesa, with a slow, ironic smile.

"Yes--she's a bit baby-faced," said Aaron.

"Trying to be more innocent than her own common-sense will let her," said the Marchesa.

"I don't agree with you, Nan," said her husband. "I think it is just that wistfulness and innocence which makes her the true Venus: the true modern Venus. She chooses NOT to know too much. And that is her

attraction. Don't you agree, Aaron? Excuse me, but everybody speaks of you as Aaron. It seems to come naturally. Most people speak of me as Manfredi, too, because it is easier, perhaps, than Del Torre. So if you find it easier, use it. Do you mind that I call you Aaron?"

"Not at all. I hate Misters, always."

"Yes, so do I. I like one name only."

The little officer seemed very winning and delightful to Aaron this evening--and Aaron began to like him extremely. But the dominating consciousness in the room was the woman's.

"DO you agree, Mr. Sisson?" said the Marchesa. "Do you agree that the mock-innocence and the sham-wistfulness of Botticelli's Venus are her great charms?"

"I don't think she is at all charming, as a person," said Aaron. "As a particular woman, she makes no impression on me at all. But as a picture--and the fresh air, particularly the fresh air. She doesn't seem so much a woman, you know, as the kind of out-of-doors morning-feelings at the seaside."

"Quite! A sort of sea-scape of a woman. With a perfectly sham innocence. Are you as keen on innocence as Manfredi is?"

"Innocence?" said Aaron. "It's the sort of thing I don't have much feeling about."

"Ah, I know you," laughed the soldier wickedly. "You are the sort of man who wants to be Anthony to Cleopatra. Ha-ha!"

Aaron winced as if struck. Then he too smiled, flattered. Yet he felt he had been struck! Did he want to be Anthony to Cleopatra? Without knowing, he was watching the Marchesa. And she was looking away, but knew he was watching her. And at last she turned her eyes to his, with a slow, dark smile, full of pain and fuller still of knowledge. A strange, dark, silent look of knowledge she gave him: from so far away, it seemed. And he felt all the bonds that held him melting away. His eyes remained fixed and gloomy, but with his mouth he smiled back at her. And he was terrified. He knew he was sulking towards her--sulking towards her. And he was terrified. But at the back of his mind, also, he knew there was Lilly, whom he might depend on. And also he wanted to sink towards her. The flesh and blood of him simply melted out, in desire towards her. Cost what may, he must come to her. And yet he knew at the same time that, cost what may, he must keep the power to recover himself from her. He must have his cake and eat it.

And she became Cleopatra to him. "Age cannot wither, nor custom stale--" To his instinctive, unwilled fancy, she was Cleopatra.

They went in to dinner, and he sat on her right hand. It was a smallish

table, with a very few daisy-flowers: everything rather frail, and sparse. The food the same--nothing very heavy, all rather exquisite. They drank hock. And he was aware of her beautiful arms, and her bosom; her low-crowded, thick hair, parted in the centre: the sapphires on her throat, the heavy rings on her fingers: and the paint on her lips, the fard. Something deep, deep at the bottom of him hovered upon her, cleaved to her. Yet he was as if sightless, in a stupor. Who was she, what was she? He had lost all his grasp. Only he sat there, with his face turned to hers, or to her, all the time. And she talked to him. But she never looked at him.

Indeed she said little. It was the husband who talked. His manner towards Aaron was almost caressive. And Aaron liked it. The woman was silent mostly, and seemed remote. And Aaron felt his life ebb towards her. He felt the marvellousness, the rich beauty of her arms and breast. And the thought of her gold-dusted smooth limbs beneath the table made him feel almost an idiot.

The second wine was a gold-coloured Moselle, very soft and rich and beautiful. She drank this with pleasure, as one who understands. And for dessert there was a dish of cacchi--that orange-coloured, pulpy Japanese fruit--persimmons. Aaron had never eaten these before. Soft, almost slimy, of a wonderful colour, and of a flavour that had sunk from harsh astringency down to that first decay-sweetness which is all autumn-rich. The Marchese loved them, and scooped them out with his spoon. But she ate none.

Aaron did not know what they talked about, what was said. If someone had taken his mind away altogether, and left him with nothing but a body and a spinal consciousness, it would have been the same.

But at coffee the talk turned to Manfredi's duties. He would not be free from the army for some time yet. On the morrow, for example, he had to be out and away before it was day. He said he hated it, and wanted to be a free man once more. But it seemed to Aaron he would be a very bored man, once he was free. And then they drifted on to talk of the palazzo in which was their apartment.

"We've got such a fine terrace--you can see it from your house where you are," said Manfredi. "Have you noticed it?"

"No," said Aaron.

"Near that tuft of palm-trees. Don't you know?"

"No," said Aaron.

"Let us go out and show it him," said the Marchesa.

Manfredi fetched her a cloak, and they went through various doors, then up some steps. The terrace was broad and open. It looked straight across the river at the opposite Lungarno: and there was the thin-necked tower

of the Palazzo Vecchio, and the great dome of the cathedral in the distance, in shadow-bulk in the cold-aired night of stars. Little trams were running brilliant over the flat new bridge on the right. And from a garden just below rose a tuft of palm-trees.

"You see," said the Marchesa, coming and standing close to Aaron, so that she just touched him, "you can know the terrace, just by these palm trees. And you are in the Nardini just across there, are you? On the top floor, you said?"

"Yes, the top floor--one of the middle windows, I think."

"One that is always open now--and the others are shut. I have noticed it, not connecting it with you."

"Yes, my window is always open."

She was leaning very slightly against him, as he stood. And he knew, with the same kind of inevitability with which he knew he would one day die, that he would be the lover of this woman. Nay, that he was her lover already.

"Don't take cold," said Manfredi.

She turned at once indoors. Aaron caught a faint whiff of perfume from the little orange trees in tubs round the wall.

"Will you get the flute?" she said as they entered.

"And will you sing?" he answered.

"Play first," she said.

He did as she wished. As the other night, he went into the big music-room to play. And the stream of sound came out with the quick wild imperiousness of the pipe. It had an immediate effect on her. She seemed to relax the peculiar, drug-like tension which was upon her at all ordinary times. She seemed to go still, and yielding. Her red mouth looked as if it might moan with relief. She sat with her chin dropped on her breast, listening. And she did not move. But she sat softly, breathing rather quick, like one who has been hurt, and is soothed. A certain womanly naturalness seemed to soften her.

And the music of the flute came quick, rather brilliant like a call-note, or like a long quick message, half command. To her it was like a pure male voice--as a blackbird's when he calls: a pure male voice, not only calling, but telling her something, telling her something, and soothing her soul to sleep. It was like the fire-music putting Brunnhilde to sleep. But the pipe did not flicker and sink. It seemed to cause a natural relaxation in her soul, a peace. Perhaps it was more like waking to a sweet, morning awakening, after a night of tormented, painful tense sleep. Perhaps more like that.

When Aaron came in, she looked at him with a gentle, fresh smile that seemed to make the fard on her face look like a curious tiredness, which now she might recover from. And as the last time, it was difficult for her to identify this man with the voice of the flute. It was rather difficult. Except that, perhaps, between his brows was something of a doubt, and in his bearing an aloofness that made her dread he might go away and not come back. She could see it in him, that he might go away and not come back.

She said nothing to him, only just smiled. And the look of knowledge in her eyes seemed, for the moment, to be contained in another look: a look of faith, and at last happiness. Aaron's heart stood still. No, in her moment's mood of faith and at last peace, life-trust, he was perhaps more terrified of her than in her previous sinister elegance. His spirit started and shrank. What was she going to ask of him?

"I am so anxious that you should come to play one Saturday morning," said Manfredi. "With an accompaniment, you know. I should like so much

to hear you with piano accompaniment."

"Very well," said Aaron.

"Will you really come? And will you practise with me, so that I can accompany you?" said Manfredi eagerly.

"Yes. I will," said Aaron.

"Oh, good! Oh, good! Look here, come in on Friday morning and let us both look through the music."

"If Mr. Sisson plays for the public," said the Marchesa, "he must not do it for charity. He must have the proper fee."

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

"But you must earn money, mustn't you?" said she.

"I must," said Aaron. "But I can do it somewhere else."

"No. If you play for the public, you must have your earnings. When you play for me, it is different."

"Of course," said Manfredi. "Every man must have his wage. I have mine from the Italian government---"

After a while, Aaron asked the Marchesa if she would sing.

"Shall I?" she said.

"Yes, do."

"Then I will sing alone first, to let you see what you think of it--I shall be like Trilby--I won't say like Yvette Guilbert, because I daren't. So I will be like Trilby, and sing a little French song. Though not Malbrouck, and without a Svengali to keep me in tune."

She went near the door, and stood with heir hands by her side. There was something wistful, almost pathetic now, in her elegance.

"Derriere chez mon pere
Vole vole mon coeur, vole!
Derriere chez mon pere
Il y a un pommier doux.
Tout doux, et iou
Et iou, tout doux.
Il y a unpommier doux.

Trois belles princesses
Vole vole mon coeur, vole!
Trois belles princesses
Sont assis dessous.
Tout doux, et iou
Et iou, tout doux.
Sont asses dessous."

She had a beautiful, strong, sweet voice. But it was faltering, stumbling and sometimes it seemed to drop almost to speech. After three verses she faltered to an end, bitterly chagrined.

"No," she said. "It's no good. I can't sing." And she dropped in her chair.

"A lovely little tune," said Aaron. "Haven't you got the music?"

She rose, not answering, and found him a little book.

"What do the words mean?" he asked her.

She told him. And then he took his flute.

"You don't mind if I play it, do you?" he said.

So he played the tune. It was so simple. And he seemed to catch the lilt and the timbre of her voice.

"Come and sing it while I play--" he said.

"I can't sing," she said, shaking her head rather bitterly.

"But let us try," said he, disappointed.

"I know I can't," she said. But she rose.

He remained sitting at the little table, the book propped up under the reading lamp. She stood at a little distance, unhappy.

"I've always been like that," she said. "I could never sing music, unless I had a thing drilled into me, and then it wasn't singing any more."

But Aaron wasn't heeding. His flute was at his mouth, he was watching her. He sounded the note, but she did not begin. She was twisting her handkerchief. So he played the melody alone. At the end of the verse, he looked up at her again, and a half mocking smile played in his eyes. Again he sounded the note, a challenge. And this time, as at his bidding, she began to sing. The flute instantly swung with a lovely soft firmness into the song, and she wavered only for a minute or two. Then her soul and her voice got free, and she sang--she sang as she wanted to sing, as she had always wanted to sing, without that awful scotch, that impediment inside her own soul, which prevented her.

She sang free, with the flute gliding along with her. And oh, how beautiful it was for her! How beautiful it was to sing the little song in the sweetness of her own spirit. How sweet it was to move pure and unhampered at last in the music! The lovely ease and lilt of her own soul in its motion through the music! She wasn't aware of the flute. She

didn't know there was anything except her own pure lovely song-drift. Her soul seemed to breathe as a butterfly breathes, as it rests on a leaf and slowly breathes its wings. For the first time! For the first time her soul drew its own deep breath. All her life, the breath had caught half-way. And now she breathed full, deep, to the deepest extent of her being.

And oh, it was so wonderful, she was dazed. The song ended, she stood with a dazed, happy face, like one just coming awake. And the fard on her face seemed like the old night-crust, the bad sleep. New and luminous she looked out. And she looked at Aaron with a proud smile.

"Bravo, Nan! That was what you wanted," said her husband.

"It was, wasn't it?" she said, turning a wondering, glowing face to him.

His face looked strange and withered and gnome-like, at the moment.

She went and sat in her chair, quite silent, as if in a trance. The two men also sat quite still. And in the silence a little drama played itself between the three, of which they knew definitely nothing. But Manfredi knew that Aaron had done what he himself never could do, for this woman. And yet the woman was his own woman, not Aaron's. And so, he was displaced. Aaron, sitting there, glowed with a sort of triumph. He had performed a little miracle, and felt himself a little wonder-worker, to whom reverence was due. And as in a dream the woman sat, feeling what

a joy it was to float and move like a swan in the high air, flying upon the wings of her own spirit. She was as a swan which never before could get its wings quite open, and so which never could get up into the open, where alone it can sing. For swans, and storks make their music only when they are high, high up in the air. Then they can give sound to their strange spirits. And so, she.

Aaron and Manfredi kept their faces averted from one another and hardly spoke to one another. It was as if two invisible hands pushed their faces apart, away, averted. And Aaron's face glimmered with a little triumph, and a little grimace of obstinacy. And the Italian's face looked old, rather monkey-like, and of a deep, almost stone-bare bitterness. The woman looked wondering from one man to the other--wondering. The glimmer of the open flower, the wonder-look, still lasted. And Aaron said in his heart, what a goodly woman, what a woman to taste and enjoy. Ah, what a woman to enjoy! And was it not his privilege? Had he not gained it?

His manhood, or rather his maleness, rose powerfully in him, in a sort of mastery. He felt his own power, he felt suddenly his own virile title to strength and reward. Suddenly, and newly flushed with his own male super-power, he was going to have his reward. The woman was his reward. So it was, in him. And he cast it over in his mind. He wanted her--ha, didn't he! But the husband sat there, like a soap-stone Chinese monkey, greyish-green. So, it would have to be another time.

He rose, therefore, and took his leave.

"But you'll let us do that again, won't you?" said she.

"When you tell me, I'll come," said he.

"Then I'll tell you soon," said she.

So he left, and went home to his own place, and there to his own remote room. As he laid his flute on the table he looked at it and smiled. He remembered that Lilly had called it Aaron's Rod.

"So you blossom, do you?--and thorn as well," said he.

For such a long time he had been gripped inside himself, and withheld. For such a long time it had been hard and unyielding, so hard and unyielding. He had wanted nothing, his desire had kept itself back, fast back. For such a long time his desire for woman had withheld itself, hard and resistant. All his deep, desirous blood had been locked, he had wanted nobody, and nothing. And it had been hard to live, so. Without desire, without any movement of passionate love, only gripped back in recoil! That was an experience to endure.

And now came his desire back. But strong, fierce as iron. Like the strength of an eagle with the lightning in its talons. Something to glory in, something overweening, the powerful male passion, arrogant,

royal, Jove's thunderbolt. Aaron's black rod of power, blossoming again with red Florentine lilies and fierce thorns. He moved about in the splendour of his own male lightning, invested in the thunder of the male passion-power. He had got it back, the male godliness, the male godhead.

So he slept, and dreamed violent dreams of strange, black strife, something like the street-riot in Milan, but more terrible. In the morning, however, he cared nothing about his dreams. As soon as it was really light, he rose, and opened his window wide. It was a grey, slow morning. But he saw neither the morning nor the river nor the woman walking on the gravel river-bed with her goose nor the green hill up to San Miniato. He watched the tuft of palm-trees, and the terrace beside it. He could just distinguish the terrace clearly, among the green of foliage. So he stood at his window for a full hour, and did not move. Motionless, planted, he stood and watched that terrace across above the Arno. But like a statue.

After an hour or so, he looked at his watch. It was nine o'clock. So he rang for his coffee, and meanwhile still stood watching the terrace on the hill. He felt his turn had come. The phoenix had risen in fire again, out of the ashes.

Therefore at ten o'clock he went over the bridge. He wrote on the back of his card a request, would she please let him have the little book of songs, that he might practise them over. The manservant went, and came back with the request that Aaron should wait. So Aaron entered, while

the man took his hat.

The manservant spoke only French and Spanish, no English. He was a Spaniard, with greyish hair and stooping shoulders, and dark, mute-seeming eyes. He spoke as little as possible. The Marchesa had inherited him from her father.

Aaron sat in the little sitting-room and waited. After a rather long time the Marchesa came in--wearing a white, thin blouse and a blue skirt. She was hardly made up at all. She had an odd pleased, yet brooding look on her face as she gave Aaron her hand. Something brooded between her brows. And her voice was strange, with a strange, secret undertone, that he could not understand. He looked up at her. And his face was bright, and his knees, as he sat, were like the knees of the gods.

"You wanted the book of chansons?" she said.

"I wanted to learn your tunes," he replied.

"Yes. Look--here it is!" And she brought him the little yellow book. It was just a hand-book, with melody and words only, no accompaniment. So she stood offering him the book, but waiting as if for something else, and standing as if with another meaning.

He opened the leaves at random.

"But I ought to know which ones you sing," said he, rising and standing by her side with the open book.

"Yes," she said, looking over his arm. He turned the pages one by one. "Trois jeunes tambours," said she. "Yes, that.... Yes, En passant par la Lorraine.... Aupres de ma blonde.... Oh, I like that one so much--" He stood and went over the tune in his mind.

"Would you like me to play it?" he said.

"Very much," said she.

So he got his flute, propped up the book against a vase, and played the tune, whilst she hummed it fragmentarily. But as he played, he felt that he did not cast the spell over her. There was no connection. She was in some mysterious way withstanding him. She was withstanding him, and his male super-power, and his thunderbolt desire. She was, in some indescribable way, throwing cold water over his phoenix newly risen from the ashes of its nest in flames.

He realised that she did not want him to play. She did not want him to look at the songs. So he put the book away, and turned round, rather baffled, not quite sure what was happening, yet feeling she was withstanding him. He glanced at her face: it was inscrutable: it was her Cleopatra face once more, yet with something new and warm in it.

He could not understand it. What was it in her face that puzzled him? Almost angered him? But she could not rob him of his male power, she could not divest him of his concentrated force.

"Won't you take off your coat?" she said, looking at him with strange, large dark eyes. A strange woman, he could not understand her. Yet, as he sat down again, having removed his overcoat, he felt her looking at his limbs, his physical body. And this went against him, he did not want it. Yet quite fixed in him too was the desire for her, her beautiful white arms, her whole soft white body. And such desire he would not contradict nor allow to be contradicted. It was his will also. Her whole soft white body--to possess it in its entirety, its fulness.

"What have you to do this morning?" she asked him.

"Nothing," he said. "Have you?" He lifted his head and looked at her.

"Nothing at all," said she.

And then they sat in silence, he with his head dropped. Then again he looked at her.

"Shall we be lovers?" he said.

She sat with her face averted, and did not answer. His heart struck heavily, but he did not relax.

"Shall we be lovers?" came his voice once more, with the faintest touch of irony.

Her face gradually grew dusky. And he wondered very much to see it.

"Yes," said she, still not looking at him. "If you wish."

"I do wish," he said. And all the time he sat with his eyes fixed on her face, and she sat with her face averted.

"Now?" he said. "And where?"

Again she was silent for some moments, as if struggling with herself. Then she looked at him--a long, strange, dark look, incomprehensible, and which he did not like.

"You don't want emotions? You don't want me to say things, do you?" he said.

A faint ironic smile came on her face.

"I know what all that is worth," she said, with curious calm equanimity. "No, I want none of that."

"Then--?"

But now she sat gazing on him with wide, heavy, incomprehensible eyes. It annoyed him.

"What do you want to see in me?" he asked, with a smile, looking steadily back again.

And now she turned aside her face once more, and once more the dusky colour came in her cheek. He waited.

"Shall I go away?" he said at length.

"Would you rather?" she said, keeping her face averted.

"No," he said.

Then again she was silent.

"Where shall I come to you?" he said.

She paused a moment still, then answered:

"I'll go to my room."

"I don't know which it is," he said.

"I'll show it you," she said.

"And then I shall come to you in ten minutes. In ten minutes," he reiterated.

So she rose, and led the way out of the little salon. He walked with her to the door of her room, bowed his head as she looked at him, holding the door handle; and then he turned and went back to the drawing-room, glancing at his watch.

In the drawing-room he stood quite still, with his feet apart, and waited. He stood with his hands behind him, and his feet apart, quite motionless, planted and firm. So the minutes went by unheeded. He looked at his watch. The ten minutes were just up. He had heard footsteps and doors. So he decided to give her another five minutes. He wished to be quite sure that she had had her own time for her own movements.

Then at the end of the five minutes he went straight to her room, entered, and locked the door behind him. She was lying in bed, with her back to him.

He found her strange, not as he had imagined her. Not powerful, as he had imagined her. Strange, in his arms she seemed almost small and childish, whilst in daily life she looked a full, womanly woman. Strange, the naked way she clung to him! Almost like a sister, a younger sister! Or like a child! It filled him with a curious wonder, almost a

bewilderment. In the dark sightlessness of passion, she seemed almost like a clinging child in his arms. And yet like a child who in some deep and essential way mocked him. In some strange and incomprehensible way, as a girl-child blindly obstinate in her deepest nature, she was against him. He felt she was not his woman. Through him went the feeling, "This is not my woman."

When, after a long sleep, he awoke and came fully to himself, with that click of awakeness which is the end, the first shades were closing on the afternoon. He got up and reached for his watch.

"Quarter past four," he said.

Her eyes stretched wide with surprise as she looked at him. But she said nothing. The same strange and wide, perhaps insatiable child-like curiosity was in her eyes as she watched him. He dressed very quickly. And her eyes were wide, and she said no single word.

But when he was dressed, and bent over her to say goodbye, she put her arms round him, that seemed such frail and childish arms now, yet withal so deadly in power. Her soft arms round his neck, her tangle of hair over his face. And yet, even as he kissed her, he felt her deadly. He wanted to be gone. He wanted to get out of her arms and her clinging and her tangle of hair and her curiosity and her strange and hateful power.

"You'll come again. We'll be like this again?" she whispered.

And it was hard for him to realise that this was that other woman, who had sat so silently on the sofa, so darkly and reservedly, at the tea at Algy's.

"Yes! I will! Goodbye now!" And he kissed her, and walked straight out of the room. Quickly he took his coat and his hat, quickly, and left the house. In his nostrils was still the scent with which the bed linen was faintly scented--he did not know what it was. But now he wiped his face and his mouth, to wipe it away.

He had eaten nothing since coffee that morning, and was hungry, faint-feeling. And his face, and his mind, felt withered. Curiously he felt blasted as if blighted by some electricity. And he knew, he knew quite well he was only in possession of a tithe of his natural faculties. And in his male spirit he felt himself hating her: hating her deeply, damnably. But he said to himself: "No, I won't hate her. I won't hate her."

So he went on, over the Ponte Vecchio, where the jeweller's windows on the bridge were already blazing with light, on into the town. He wanted to eat something, so he decided to go to a shop he knew, where one could stand and eat good tiny rolls split into truffle or salami sandwiches, and drink Marsala. So one after the other he ate little truffle rolls, and drank a few glasses of Marsala. And then he did not know what to do. He did not want to eat any more, he had had what he wanted. His hunger

had been more nervous than sensual.

So he went into the street. It was just growing dark and the town was lighting up. He felt curiously blazed, as if some flame or electric power had gone through him and withered his vital tissue. Blazed, as if some kind of electric flame had run over him and withered him. His brain felt withered, his mind had only one of its many-sighted eyes left open and unscorched. So many of the eyes of his mind were scorched now and sightless.

Yet a restlessness was in his nerves. What should he do? He remembered he had a letter in his pocket from Sir William Franks. Sir William had still teased him about his fate and his providence, in which he, Aaron, was supposed to trust. "I shall be very glad to hear from you, and to know how your benevolent Providence--or was yours a Fate--has treated you since we saw you---"

So, Aaron turned away, and walked to the post office. There he took paper, and sat down at one of the tables in the writing room, and wrote his answer. It was very strange, writing thus when most of his mind's eyes were scorched, and it seemed he could hardly see to hold the pen, to drive it straight across the paper. Yet write he must. And most of his faculties being quenched or blasted for the moment, he wrote perhaps his greatest, or his innermost, truth.--"I don't want my Fate or my Providence to treat me well. I don't want kindness or love. I don't believe in harmony and people loving one another. I believe in the fight

and in nothing else. I believe in the fight which is in everything. And if it is a question of women, I believe in the fight of love, even if it blinds me. And if it is a question of the world, I believe in fighting it and in having it hate me, even if it breaks my legs. I want the world to hate me, because I can't bear the thought that it might love me. For of all things love is the most deadly to me, and especially from such a repulsive world as I think this is...."

Well, here was a letter for a poor old man to receive. But, in the dryness of his withered mind, Aaron got it out of himself. When a man writes a letter to himself, it is a pity to post it to somebody else. Perhaps the same is true of a book.

His letter written, however, he stamped it and sealed it and put it in the box. That made it final. Then he turned towards home. One fact remained unbroken in the debris of his consciousness: that in the town was Lilly: and that when he needed, he could go to Lilly: also, that in the world was Lottie, his wife: and that against Lottie, his heart burned with a deep, deep, almost unreachable bitterness.--Like a deep burn on his deepest soul, Lottie. And like a fate which he resented, yet which steadied him, Lilly.

He went home and lay on his bed. He had enough self-command to hear the gong and go down to dinner. White and abstract-looking, he sat and ate his dinner. And then, thank God, he could go to bed, alone, in his own cold bed, alone, thank God. To be alone in the night! For this he was

unspeakably thankful.