CHAPTER XIX. CLEOPATRA, BUT NOT ANTHONY

Aaron awoke in the morning feeling better, but still only a part himself. The night alone had restored him. And the need to be alone still was his greatest need. He felt an intense resentment against the Marchesa. He felt that somehow, she had given him a scorpion. And his instinct was to hate her. And yet he avoided hating her. He remembered Lilly--and the saying that one must possess oneself, and be alone in possession of oneself. And somehow, under the influence of Lilly, he refused to follow the reflex of his own passion. He refused to hate the Marchesa. He did like her. He did esteem her. And after all, she too was struggling with her fate. He had a genuine sympathy with her. Nay, he was not going to hate her.

But he could not see her. He could not bear the thought that she might call and see him. So he took the tram to Settignano, and walked away all day into the country, having bread and sausage in his pocket. He sat for long hours among the cypress trees of Tuscany. And never had any trees seemed so like ghosts, like soft, strange, pregnant presences. He lay and watched tall cypresses breathing and communicating, faintly moving and as it were walking in the small wind. And his soul seemed to leave him and to go far away, far back, perhaps, to where life was all different and time passed otherwise than time passes now. As in clairvoyance he perceived it: that our life is only a fragment of the shell of life. That there has been and will be life, human life such as

we do not begin to conceive. Much that is life has passed away from men, leaving us all mere bits. In the dark, mindful silence and inflection of the cypress trees, lost races, lost language, lost human ways of feeling and of knowing. Men have known as we can no more know, have felt as we can no more feel. Great life-realities gone into the darkness. But the cypresses commemorate. In the afternoon, Aaron felt the cypresses rising dark about him, like so many high visitants from an old, lost, lost subtle world, where men had the wonder of demons about them, the aura of demons, such as still clings to the cypresses, in Tuscany.

All day, he did not make up his mind what he was going to do. His first impulse was never to see her again. And this was his intention all day. But as he went home in the tram he softened, and thought. Nay, that would not be fair. For how had she treated him, otherwise than generously.

She had been generous, and the other thing, that he felt blasted afterwards, which was his experience, that was fate, and not her fault. So he must see her again. He must not act like a churl. But he would tell her--he would tell her that he was a married man, and that though he had left his wife, and though he had no dogma of fidelity, still, the years of marriage had made a married man of him, and any other woman than his wife was a strange woman to him, a violation. "I will tell her," he said to himself, "that at the bottom of my heart I love Lottie still, and that I can't help it. I believe that is true. It isn't love, perhaps. But it is marriage. I am married to Lottie. And that means I

can't be married to another woman. It isn't my nature. And perhaps I can't bear to live with Lottie now, because I am married and not in love. When a man is married, he is not in love. A husband is not a lover. Lilly told me that: and I know it's true now. Lilly told me that a husband cannot be a lover, and a lover cannot be a husband. And that women will only have lovers now, and never a husband. Well, I am a husband, if I am anything. And I shall never be a lover again, not while I live. No, not to anybody. I haven't it in me. I'm a husband, and so it is finished with me as a lover. I can't be a lover any more, just as I can't be aged twenty any more. I am a man now, not an adolescent. And to my sorrow I am a husband to a woman who wants a lover: always a lover. But all women want lovers. And I can't be it any more. I don't want to. I have finished that. Finished for ever: unless I become senile---"

Therefore next day he gathered up his courage. He would not have had courage unless he had known that he was not alone. The other man was in the town, and from this fact he derived his strength: the fact that Lilly was there. So at teatime he went over the river, and rang at her door. Yes, she was at home, and she had other visitors. She was wearing a beautiful soft afternoon dress, again of a blue like chicory-flowers, a pale, warm blue. And she had cornflowers in her belt: heaven knows where she had got them.

She greeted Aaron with some of the childish shyness. He could tell that she was glad he had come, and that she had wondered at his not coming sooner. She introduced him to her visitors: two young ladies and one

old lady and one elderly Italian count. The conversation was mostly in French or Italian, so Aaron was rather out of it.

However, the visitors left fairly early, so Aaron stayed them out. When they had gone, he asked:

"Where is Manfredi?"

"He will come in soon. At about seven o'clock."

Then there was a silence again.

"You are dressed fine today," he said to her.

"Am I?" she smiled.

He was never able to make out quite what she felt, what she was feeling. But she had a quiet little air of proprietorship in him, which he did not like.

"You will stay to dinner tonight, won't you?" she said.

"No--not tonight," he said. And then, awkwardly, he added: "You know. I think it is better if we are friends--not lovers. You know--I don't feel free. I feel my wife, I suppose, somewhere inside me. And I can't help it---"

She bent her head and was silent for some moments. Then she lifted her face and looked at him oddly.

"Yes," she said. "I am sure you love your wife."

The reply rather staggered him--and to tell the truth, annoyed him.

"Well," he said. "I don't know about love. But when one has been married for ten years--and I did love her--then--some sort of bond or something grows. I think some sort of connection grows between us, you know. And it isn't natural, quite, to break it.--Do you know what I mean?"

She paused a moment. Then, very softly, almost gently, she said:

"Yes, I do. I know so well what you mean."

He was really surprised at her soft acquiescence. What did she mean?

"But we can be friends, can't we?" he said.

"Yes, I hope so. Why, yes! Goodness, yes! I should be sorry if we couldn't be friends."

After which speech he felt that everything was all right--everything was A-one. And when Manfredi came home, the first sound he heard was the

flute and his wife's singing.

"I'm so glad you've come," his wife said to him. "Shall we go into the sala and have real music? Will you play?"

"I should love to," replied the husband.

Behold them then in the big drawing-room, and Aaron and the Marchese practising together, and the Marchesa singing an Italian folk-song while her husband accompanied her on the pianoforte. But her singing was rather strained and forced. Still, they were quite a little family, and it seemed quite nice. As soon as she could, the Marchesa left the two men together, whilst she sat apart. Aaron and Manfredi went through old Italian and old German music, tried one thing and then another, and seemed quite like brothers. They arranged a piece which they should play together on a Saturday morning, eight days hence.

The next day, Saturday, Aaron went to one of the Del Torre music mornings. There was a string quartette--and a violin soloist--and the Marchese at the piano. The audience, some dozen or fourteen friends, sat at the near end of the room, or in the smaller salotta, whilst the musicians performed at the further end of the room. The Lillys were there, both Tanny and her husband. But apart from these, Aaron knew nobody, and felt uncomfortable. The Marchesa gave her guests little sandwiches and glasses of wine or Marsala or vermouth, as they chose. And she was quite the hostess: the well-bred and very simple, but still

the conventional hostess. Aaron did not like it. And he could see that Lilly too was unhappy. In fact, the little man bolted the moment he could, dragging after him the indignant Tanny, who was so looking forward to the excellent little sandwiches. But no--Lilly just rudely bolted. Aaron followed as soon as he could.

"Will you come to dinner tomorrow evening?" said his hostess to him as he was leaving. And he agreed. He had really resented seeing her as a conventional hostess, attending so charmingly to all the other people, and treating him so merely as one of the guests, among many others. So that when at the last moment she quietly invited him to dinner next day, he was flattered and accepted at once.

The next day was Sunday--the seventh day after his coming together with the Marchesa--which had taken place on the Monday. And already he was feeling much less dramatic in his decision to keep himself apart from her, to be merely friends. Already the memory of the last time was fanning up in him, not as a warning but as a terrible incitement. Again the naked desire was getting hold of him, with that peculiar brutal powerfulness which startled him and also pleased him.

So that by the time Sunday morning came, his recoil had exhausted itself, and he was ready again, eager again, but more wary this time. He sat in his room alone in the morning, playing his flute, playing over from memory the tunes she loved, and imagining how he and she would get into unison in the evening. His flute, his Aaron's rod, would blossom

once again with splendid scarlet flowers, the red Florentine lilies.
It was curious, the passion he had for her: just unalloyed desire, and nothing else. Something he had not known in his life before. Previously there had been always some personal quality, some sort of personal tenderness. But here, none. She did not seem to want it. She seemed to hate it, indeed. No, all he felt was stark, naked desire, without a single pretension. True enough, his last experience had been a warning to him. His desire and himself likewise had broken rather disastrously under the proving. But not finally broken. He was ready again. And with all the sheer powerful insolence of desire he looked forward to the evening. For he almost expected Manfredi would not be there. The officer had said something about having to go to Padua on the Saturday afternoon.

So Aaron went skipping off to his appointment, at seven o'clock. Judge of his chagrin, then, when he found already seated in the salotta an elderly, quite well-known, very cultured and very well-connected English authoress. She was charming, in her white hair and dress of soft white wool and white lace, with a long chain of filigree gold beads, like bubbles. She was charming in her old-fashioned manner too, as if the world were still safe and stable, like a garden in which delightful culture, and choice ideas bloomed safe from wind and weather. Alas, never was Aaron more conscious of the crude collapse in the world than when he listened to this animated, young-seeming lady from the safe days of the seventies. All the old culture and choice ideas seemed like blowing bubbles. And dear old Corinna Wade, she seemed to be blowing

bubbles still, as she sat there so charming in her soft white dress, and talked with her bright animation about the influence of woman in Parliament and the influence of woman in the Periclean day. Aaron listened spell-bound, watching the bubbles float round his head, and almost hearing them go pop.

To complete the party arrived an elderly litterateur who was more proud of his not-very-important social standing than of his literature. In fact he was one of those English snobs of the old order, living abroad. Perfectly well dressed for the evening, his grey hair and his prim face was the most well-dressed thing to be met in North Italy.

"Oh, so glad to see you, Mr. French. I didn't know you were in Florence again. You make that journey from Venice so often. I wonder you don't get tired of it," cried Corinna Wade.

"No," he said. "So long as duty to England calls me to Florence, I shall come to Florence. But I can LIVE in no town but Venice."

"No, I suppose you can't. Well, there is something special about Venice: having no streets and no carriages, and moving about in a gondola. I suppose it is all much more soothing."

"Much less nerve-racking, yes. And then there is a quality in the whole life. Of course I see few English people in Venice--only the old Venetian families, as a rule."

"Ah, yes. That must be very interesting. They are very exclusive still, the Venetian noblesse?" said Miss Wade.

"Oh, very exclusive," said Mr. French. "That is one of the charms. Venice is really altogether exclusive. It excludes the world, really, and defies time and modern movement. Yes, in spite of the steamers on the canal, and the tourists."

"That is so. That is so. Venice is a strange back-water. And the old families are very proud still, in these democratic days. They have a great opinion of themselves, I am told."

"Well," said Mr. French. "Perhaps you know the rhyme:

"'Veneziano gran' Signore
Padovano buon' dotore.
Vicenzese mangia il gatto
Veronese tutto matto---'"

"How very amusing!" said Miss Wade. "Veneziana gran' Signore. The Venetian is a great gentleman! Yes, I know they are all convinced of it. Really, how very amusing, in these advanced days. To be born a Venetian, is to be born a great gentleman! But this outdoes divine right of king."

"To be born a Venetian GENTLEMAN, is to be born a great gentleman," said

Mr. French, rather fussily.

"You seriously think so?" said Miss Wade. "Well now, what do you base your opinion on?"

Mr. French gave various bases for his opinion.

"Yes--interesting. Very interesting. Rather like the Byzantines--lingering on into far other ages. Anna Comnena always charmed me very much. HOW she despised the flower of the north--even Tancred! And so the lingering Venetian families! And you, in your palazzo on the Grand Canal: you are a northern barbarian civilised into the old Venetian Signoria. But how very romantic a situation!"

It was really amusing to see the old maid, how she skirmished and hit out gaily, like an old jaunty free lance: and to see the old bachelor, how prim he was, and nervy and fussy and precious, like an old maid.

But need we say that Mr. Aaron felt very much out of it. He sat and listened, with a sardonic small smile on his face and a sardonic gleam in his blue eyes, that looked so very blue on such an occasion. He made the two elderly people uncomfortable with his silence: his democratic silence, Miss Wade might have said.

However, Miss Wade lived out towards Galuzzo, so she rose early, to catch her tram. And Mr. French gallantly and properly rose to accompany

her, to see her safe on board. Which left Aaron and the Marchesa alone.

"What time is Manfredi coming back?" said he.

"Tomorrow," replied she.

There was a pause.

"Why do you have those people?" he asked.

"Who?"

"Those two who were here this evening."

"Miss Wade and Mr. French?--Oh, I like Miss Wade so very much. She is so refreshing."

"Those old people," said Aaron. "They licked the sugar off the pill, and go on as if everything was toffee. And we've got to swallow the pill. It's easy to be refreshing---"

"No, don't say anything against her. I like her so much."

"And him?"

"Mr. French!--Well, he's perhaps a little like the princess who felt

the pea through three feather-beds. But he can be quite witty, and an excellent conversationalist, too. Oh yes, I like him quite well."

"Matter of taste," said Aaron.

They had not much to say to one another. The time passed, in the pauses. He looked at his watch.

"I shall have to go," he said.

"Won't you stay?" she said, in a small, muted voice.

"Stay all night?" he said.

"Won't you?"

"Yes," he said quietly. Did he not feel the strength of his desire on him.

After which she said no more. Only she offered him whiskey and soda, which he accepted.

"Go then," he said to her. "And I'll come to you.--Shall I come in fifteen minutes?"

She looked at him with strange, slow dark eyes. And he could not

understand.

"Yes," she said. And she went.

And again, this night as before, she seemed strangely small and clinging in his arms. And this night he felt his passion drawn from him as if a long, live nerve were drawn out from his body, a long live thread of electric fire, a long, living nerve finely extracted from him, from the very roots of his soul. A long fine discharge of pure, bluish fire, from the core of his soul. It was an excruciating, but also an intensely gratifying sensation.

This night he slept with a deeper obliviousness than before. But ah, as it grew towards morning how he wished he could be alone.

They must stay together till the day was light. And she seemed to love clinging to him and curling strangely on his breast. He could never reconcile it with her who was a hostess entertaining her guests. How could she now in a sort of little ecstasy curl herself and nestle herself on his, Aaron's breast, tangling his face all over with her hair. He verily believed that this was what she really wanted of him: to curl herself on his naked breast, to make herself small, small, to feel his arms around her, while he himself was remote, silent, in some way inaccessible. This seemed almost to make her beside herself with gratification. But why, why? Was it because he was one of her own race, and she, as it were, crept right home to him?

He did not know. He only knew it had nothing to do with him: and that, save out of complaisance, he did not want it. It simply blasted his own central life. It simply blighted him.

And she clung to him closer. Strange, she was afraid of him! Afraid of him as of a fetish! Fetish afraid, and fetish-fascinated! Or was her fear only a delightful game of cat and mouse? Or was the fear genuine, and the delight the greater: a sort of sacrilege? The fear, and the dangerous, sacrilegious power over that which she feared.

In some way, she was not afraid of him at all. In some other way she used him as a mere magic implement, used him with the most amazing priestess-craft. Himself, the individual man which he was, this she treated with an indifference that was startling to him.

He forgot, perhaps, that this was how he had treated her. His famous desire for her, what had it been but this same attempt to strike a magic fire out of her, for his own ecstasy. They were playing the same game of fire. In him, however, there was all the time something hard and reckless and defiant, which stood apart. She was absolutely gone in her own incantations. She was absolutely gone, like a priestess utterly involved in her terrible rites. And he was part of the ritual only, God and victim in one. God and victim! All the time, God and victim. When his aloof soul realised, amid the welter of incantation, how he was being used,--not as himself but as something quite different--God and

victim--then he dilated with intense surprise, and his remote soul stood up tall and knew itself alone. He didn't want it, not at all. He knew he was apart. And he looked back over the whole mystery of their love-contact. Only his soul was apart.

He was aware of the strength and beauty and godlikeness that his breast was then to her--the magic. But himself, he stood far off, like Moses' sister Miriam. She would drink the one drop of his innermost heart's blood, and he would be carrion. As Cleopatra killed her lovers in the morning. Surely they knew that death was their just climax. They had approached the climax. Accept then.

But his soul stood apart, and could have nothing to do with it. If he had really been tempted, he would have gone on, and she might have had his central heart's blood. Yes, and thrown away the carrion. He would have been willing.

But fatally, he was not tempted. His soul stood apart and decided. At the bottom of his soul he disliked her. Or if not her, then her whole motive. Her whole life-mode. He was neither God nor victim: neither greater nor less than himself. His soul, in its isolation as she lay on his breast, chose it so, with the soul's inevitability. So, there was no temptation.

When it was sufficiently light, he kissed her and left her. Quietly he left the silent flat. He had some difficulty in unfastening the various

locks and bars and catches of the massive door downstairs, and began, in irritation and anger, to feel he was a prisoner, that he was locked in. But suddenly the ponderous door came loose, and he was out in the street. The door shut heavily behind him, with a shudder. He was out in the morning streets of Florence.