

CHAPTER XX. THE BROKEN ROD

The day was rainy. Aaron stayed indoors alone, and copied music and slept. He felt the same stunned, withered feeling as before, but less intensely, less disastrously, this time. He knew now, without argument or thought that he would never go again to the Marchesa: not as a lover. He would go away from it all. He did not dislike her. But he would never see her again. A great gulf had opened, leaving him alone on the far side.

He did not go out till after dinner. When he got downstairs he found the heavy night-door closed. He wondered: then remembered the Signorina's fear of riots and disturbances. As again he fumbled with the catches, he felt that the doors of Florence were trying to prevent his egress. However, he got out.

It was a very dark night, about nine o'clock, and deserted seeming. He was struck by the strange, deserted feeling of the city's atmosphere. Yet he noticed before him, at the foot of the statue, three men, one with a torch: a long torch with naked flames. The men were stooping over something dark, the man with the torch bending forward too. It was a dark, weird little group, like Mediaeval Florence. Aaron lingered on his doorstep, watching. He could not see what they were doing. But now, the two were crouching down; over a long dark object on the ground, and the one with the torch bending also to look. What was it? They were just at

the foot of the statue, a dark little group under the big pediment, the torch-flames weirdly flickering as the torch-bearer moved and stooped lower to the two crouching men, who seemed to be kneeling.

Aaron felt his blood stir. There was something dark and mysterious, stealthy, in the little scene. It was obvious the men did not want to draw attention, they were so quiet and furtive-seeming. And an eerie instinct prevented Aaron's going nearer to look. Instead, he swerved on to the Lungarno, and went along the top of the square, avoiding the little group in the centre. He walked the deserted dark-seeming street by the river, then turned inwards, into the city. He was going to the Piazza Vittoria Emmanuele, to sit in the cafe which is the centre of Florence at night. There he could sit for an hour, and drink his vermouth and watch the Florentines.

As he went along one of the dark, rather narrow streets, he heard a hurrying of feet behind him. Glancing round, he saw the torch-bearer coming along at a trot, holding his flaming torch up in front of him as he trotted down the middle of the narrow dark street. Aaron shrank under the wall. The trotting torch-bearer drew near, and now Aaron perceived the other two men slowly trotting behind, stealthily, bearing a stretcher on which a body was wrapped up, completely and darkly covered. The torch-bearer passed, the men with the stretcher passed too, hastily and stealthily, the flickering flames revealing them. They took no notice of Aaron, no notice of anything, but trotted softly on towards the centre of the city. Their queer, quick footsteps echoed down the

distance. Then Aaron too resumed his way.

He came to the large, brilliantly-lighted cafe. It was Sunday evening, and the place was full. Men, Florentines, many, many men sat in groups and in twos and threes at the little marble tables. They were mostly in dark clothes or black overcoats. They had mostly been drinking just a cup of coffee--others however had glasses of wine or liquor. But mostly it was just a little coffee-tray with a tiny coffee pot and a cup and saucer. There was a faint film of tobacco smoke. And the men were all talking: talking, talking with that peculiar intensity of the Florentines. Aaron felt the intense, compressed sound of many half-secret voices. For the little groups and couples abated their voices, none wished that others should hear what they said.

Aaron was looking for a seat--there was no table to him--when suddenly someone took him by the arm. It was Argyle.

"Come along, now! Come and join us. Here, this way! Come along!"

Aaron let himself be led away towards a corner. There sat Lilly and a strange man: called Levison. The room was warm. Aaron could never bear to be too hot. After sitting a minute, he rose and took off his coat, and hung it on a stand near the window. As he did so he felt the weight of his flute--it was still in his pocket. And he wondered if it was safe to leave it.

"I suppose no one will steal from the overcoat pockets," he said, as he sat down.

"My dear chap, they'd steal the gold filling out of your teeth, if you happened to yawn," said Argyle. "Why, have you left valuables in your overcoat?"

"My flute," said Aaron.

"Oh, they won't steal that," said Argyle.

"Besides," said Lilly, "we should see anyone who touched it."

And so they settled down to the vermouth.

"Well," said Argyle, "what have you been doing with yourself, eh? I haven't seen a glimpse of you for a week. Been going to the dogs, eh?"

"Or the bitches," said Aaron.

"Oh, but look here, that's bad! That's bad! I can see I shall have to take you in hand, and commence my work of reform. Oh, I'm a great reformer, a Zwingli and Savonarola in one. I couldn't count the number of people I've led into the right way. It takes some finding, you know. Strait is the gate--damned strait sometimes. A damned tight squeeze...." Argyle was somewhat intoxicated. He spoke with a slight slur, and

laughed, really tickled at his own jokes. The man Levison smiled acquiescent. But Lilly was not listening. His brow was heavy and he seemed abstracted. He hardly noticed Aaron's arrival.

"Did you see the row yesterday?" asked Levison.

"No," said Aaron. "What was it?"

It was the socialists. They were making a demonstration against the imprisonment of one of the railway-strikers. I was there. They went on all right, with a good bit of howling and gibing: a lot of young louts, you know. And the shop-keepers shut up shop, and nobody showed the Italian flag, of course. Well, when they came to the Via Benedetto Croce, there were a few mounted carabinieri. So they stopped the procession, and the sergeant said that the crowd could continue, could go on where they liked, but would they not go down the Via Verrocchio, because it was being repaired, the roadway was all up, and there were piles of cobble stones. These might prove a temptation and lead to trouble. So would the demonstrators not take that road--they might take any other they liked.--Well, the very moment he had finished, there was a revolver shot, he made a noise, and fell forward over his horse's nose. One of the anarchists had shot him. Then there was hell let loose, the carabinieri fired back, and people were bolting and fighting like devils. I cleared out, myself. But my God--what do you think of it?"

"Seems pretty mean," said Aaron.

"Mean!--He had just spoken them fair--they could go where they liked, only would they not go down the one road, because of the heap of stones. And they let him finish. And then shot him dead."

"Was he dead?" said Aaron.

"Yes--killed outright, the Nazione says."

There was a silence. The drinkers in the cafe all continued to talk vehemently, casting uneasy glances.

"Well," said Argyle, "if you let loose the dogs of war, you mustn't expect them to come to heel again in five minutes."

"But there's no fair play about it, not a bit," said Levison.

"Ah, my dear fellow, are you still so young and callow that you cherish the illusion of fair play?" said Argyle.

"Yes, I am," said Levison.

"Live longer and grow wiser," said Argyle, rather contemptuously.

"Are you a socialist?" asked Levison.

"Am I my aunt Tabitha's dachshund bitch called Bella," said Argyle, in his musical, indifferent voice. "Yes, Bella's her name. And if you can tell me a damner name for a dog, I shall listen, I assure you, attentively."

"But you haven't got an aunt called Tabitha," said Aaron.

"Haven't I? Oh, haven't I? I've got TWO aunts called Tabitha: if not more."

"They aren't of any vital importance to you, are they?" said Levison.

"Not the very least in the world--if it hadn't been that my elder Aunt Tabitha had christened her dachshund bitch Bella. I cut myself off from the family after that. Oh, I turned over a new leaf, with not a family name on it. Couldn't stand Bella amongst the rest."

"You must have strained most of the gnats out of your drink, Argyle," said Lilly, laughing.

"Assiduously! Assiduously! I can't stand these little vermin. Oh, I am quite indifferent about swallowing a camel or two--or even a whole string of dromedaries. How charmingly Eastern that sounds! But gnats! Not for anything in the world would I swallow one."

"You're a bit of a SOCIALIST though, aren't you?" persisted Levison, now

turning to Lilly.

"No," said Lilly. "I was."

"And am no more," said Argyle sarcastically. "My dear fellow, the only hope of salvation for the world lies in the re-institution of slavery."

"What kind of slavery?" asked Levison.

"Slavery! SLAVERY! When I say SLAVERY I don't mean any of your damned modern reform cant. I mean solid sound slavery on which the Greek and the Roman world rested. FAR finer worlds than ours, my dear chap! Oh FAR finer! And can't be done without slavery. Simply can't be done.--Oh, they'll all come to realise it, when they've had a bit more of this democratic washer-women business."

Levison was laughing, with a slight sneer down his nose. "Anyhow, there's no immediate danger--or hope, if you prefer it--of the re-instituting of classic slavery," he said.

"Unfortunately no. We are all such fools," said Argyle.

"Besides," said Levison, "who would you make slaves of?"

"Everybody, my dear chap: beginning with the idealists and the theorising Jews, and after them your nicely-bred gentlemen, and then

perhaps, your profiteers and Rothschilds, and ALL politicians, and ending up with the proletariat," said Argyle.

"Then who would be the masters?--the professional classes, doctors and lawyers and so on?"

"What? Masters. They would be the sewerage slaves, as being those who had made most smells." There was a moment's silence.

"The only fault I have to find with your system," said Levison, rather acidly, "is that there would be only one master, and everybody else slaves."

"Do you call that a fault? What do you want with more than one master? Are you asking for several?--Well, perhaps there's cunning in THAT.--Cunning devils, cunning devils, these theorising slaves--" And Argyle pushed his face with a devilish leer into Aaron's face. "Cunning devils!" he reiterated, with a slight tipsy slur. "That be-fouled Epictetus wasn't the last of 'em--nor the first. Oh, not by any means, not by any means."

Here Lilly could not avoid a slight spasm of amusement. "But returning to serious conversation," said Levison, turning his rather sallow face to Lilly. "I think you'll agree with me that socialism is the inevitable next step--"

Lilly waited for some time without answering. Then he said, with unwilling attention to the question: "I suppose it's the logically inevitable next step."

"Use logic as lavatory paper," cried Argyle harshly. "Yes--logically inevitable--and humanly inevitable at the same time. Some form of socialism is bound to come, no matter how you postpone it or try variations," said Levison.

"All right, let it come," said Lilly. "It's not my affair, neither to help it nor to keep it back, or even to try varying it."

"There I don't follow you," said Levison. "Suppose you were in Russia now--"

"I watch it I'm not."

"But you're in Italy, which isn't far off. Supposing a socialist revolution takes place all around you. Won't that force the problem on you?--It is every man's problem," persisted Levison.

"Not mine," said Lilly.

"How shall you escape it?" said Levison.

"Because to me it is no problem. To Bolsh or not to Bolsh, as far as my

mind goes, presents no problem. Not any more than to be or not to be. To be or not to be is simply no problem--"

"No, I quite agree, that since you are already existing, and since death is ultimately inevitable, to be or not to be is no sound problem," said Levison. "But the parallel isn't true of socialism. That is not a problem of existence, but of a certain mode of existence which centuries of thought and action on the part of Europe have now made logically inevitable for Europe. And therefore there is a problem. There is more than a problem, there is a dilemma. Either we must go to the logical conclusion--or--"

"Somewhere else," said Lilly.

"Yes--yes. Precisely! But where ELSE? That's the one half of the problem: supposing you do not agree to a logical progression in human social activity. Because after all, human society through the course of ages only enacts, spasmodically but still inevitably, the logical development of a given idea."

"Well, then, I tell you.--The idea and the ideal has for me gone dead--dead as carrion--"

"Which idea, which ideal precisely?"

"The ideal of love, the ideal that it is better to give than to receive,

the ideal of liberty, the ideal of the brotherhood of man, the ideal of the sanctity of human life, the ideal of what we call goodness, charity, benevolence, public spirited-ness, the ideal of sacrifice for a cause, the ideal of unity and unanimity--all the lot--all the whole beehive of ideals--has all got the modern bee-disease, and gone putrid, stinking.--And when the ideal is dead and putrid, the logical sequence is only stink.--Which, for me, is the truth concerning the ideal of good, peaceful, loving humanity and its logical sequence in socialism and equality, equal opportunity or whatever you like.--But this time he stinketh--and I'm sorry for any Christus who brings him to life again, to stink livingly for another thirty years: the beastly Lazarus of our idealism."

"That may be true for you--"

"But it's true for nobody else," said Lilly. "All the worse for them. Let them die of the bee-disease."

"Not only that," persisted Levison, "but what is your alternative? Is it merely nihilism?"

"My alternative," said Lilly, "is an alternative for no one but myself, so I'll keep my mouth shut about it."

"That isn't fair."

"I tell you, the ideal of fairness stinks with the rest.--I have no obligation to say what I think."

"Yes, if you enter into conversation, you have--"

"Bah, then I didn't enter into conversation.--The only thing is, I agree in the rough with Argyle. You've got to have a sort of slavery again. People are not MEN: they are insects and instruments, and their destiny is slavery. They are too many for me, and so what I think

is ineffectual. But ultimately they will be brought to agree--after sufficient extermination--and then they will elect for themselves a proper and healthy and energetic slavery."

"I should like to know what you mean by slavery. Because to me it is impossible that slavery should be healthy and energetic. You seem to have some other idea in your mind, and you merely use the word slavery out of exasperation--"

"I mean it none the less. I mean a real committal of the life-issue of inferior beings to the responsibility of a superior being."

"It'll take a bit of knowing, who are the inferior and which is the superior," said Levison sarcastically.

"Not a bit. It is written between a man's brows, which he is."

"I'm afraid we shall all read differently."

"So long as we're liars."

"And putting that question aside: I presume that you mean that this committal of the life-issue of inferior beings to someone higher shall be made voluntarily--a sort of voluntary self-gift of the inferiors--"

"Yes--more or less--and a voluntary acceptance. For it's no pretty gift, after all.--But once made it must be held fast by genuine power. Oh yes--no playing and fooling about with it. Permanent and very efficacious power."

"You mean military power?"

"I do, of course."

Here Levison smiled a long, slow, subtle smile of ridicule. It all seemed to him the preposterous pretentiousness of a megalomaniac--one whom, after a while, humanity would probably have the satisfaction of putting into prison, or into a lunatic asylum. And Levison felt strong, overwhelmingly strong, in the huge social power with which he, insignificant as he was, was armed against such criminal-imbecile pretensions as those above set forth. Prison or the lunatic asylum. The face of the fellow gloated in these two inevitable engines of his

disapproval.

"It will take you some time before you'll get your doctrines accepted," he said.

"Accepted! I'd be sorry. I don't want a lot of swine snouting and sniffing at me with their acceptance.--Bah, Levison--one can easily make a fool of you. Do you take this as my gospel?"

"I take it you are speaking seriously."

Here Lilly broke into that peculiar, gay, whimsical smile.

"But I should say the blank opposite with just as much fervour," he declared.

"Do you mean to say you don't MEAN what you've been saying?" said Levison, now really looking angry.

"Why, I'll tell you the real truth," said Lilly. "I think every man is a sacred and holy individual, NEVER to be violated; I think there is only one thing I hate to the verge of madness, and that is BULLYING. To see any living creature BULLIED, in any way, almost makes a murderer of me. That is true. Do you believe it--?"

"Yes," said Levison unwillingly. "That may be true as well. You have no

doubt, like most of us, got a complex nature which--"

C R A S H!

There intervened one awful minute of pure shock, when the soul was in darkness.

Out of this shock Aaron felt himself issuing amid a mass of terrible sensations: the fearful blow of the explosion, the noise of glass, the hoarse howl of people, the rushing of men, the sudden gulf, the awful gulping whirlpool of horror in the social life.

He stood in agony and semi-blindness amid a chaos. Then as he began to recover his consciousness, he found himself standing by a pillar some distance from where he had been sitting: he saw a place where tables and chairs were all upside down, legs in the air, amid debris of glass and breakage: he saw the cafe almost empty, nearly everybody gone: he saw the owner, or the manager, advancing aghast to the place of debris: he saw Lilly standing not far off, white as a sheet, and as if unconscious. And still he had no idea of what had happened. He thought perhaps something had broken down. He could not understand.

Lilly began to look round. He caught Aaron's eye. And then Aaron began to approach his friend.

"What is it?" he asked.

"A bomb," said Lilly.

The manager, and one old waiter, and three or four youths had now advanced to the place of debris. And now Aaron saw that a man was lying there--and horror, blood was running across the floor of the cafe. Men began now hastily to return to the place. Some seized their hats and departed again at once. But many began to crowd in--a black eager crowd of men pressing to where the bomb had burst--where the man was lying. It was rather dark, some of the lamps were broken--but enough still shone. Men surged in with that eager, excited zest of people, when there has been an accident. Grey carabinieri, and carabinieri in the cocked hat and fine Sunday uniform pressed forward officiously.

"Let us go," said Lilly.

And he went to the far corner, where his hat hung. But Aaron looked in vain for his own hat. The bomb had fallen near the stand where he had hung it and his overcoat.

"My hat and coat?" he said to Lilly.

Lilly, not very tall, stood on tiptoe. Then he climbed on a chair and looked round. Then he squeezed past the crowd.

Aaron followed. On the other side of the crowd excited angry men

were wrestling over overcoats that were mixed up with a broken marble table-top. Aaron spied his own black hat under the sofa near the wall. He waited his turn and then in the confusion pressed forward to where the coats were. Someone had dragged out his, and it lay on the floor under many feet. He managed, with a struggle, to get it from under the feet of the crowd. He felt at once for his flute. But his trampled, torn coat had no flute in its pocket. He pushed and struggled, caught sight of a section, and picked it up. But it was split right down, two silver stops were torn out, and a long thin splinch of wood was curiously torn off. He looked at it, and his heart stood still. No need to look for the rest.

He felt utterly, utterly overcome--as if he didn't care what became of him any further. He didn't care whether he were hit by a bomb, or whether he himself threw the next bomb, and hit somebody. He just didn't care any more about anything in life or death. It was as if the reins of his life slipped from his hands. And he would let everything run where it would, so long as it did run.

Then he became aware of Lilly's eyes on him--and automatically he joined the little man.

"Let us go," said Lilly.

And they pushed their way through the door. The police were just marching across the square. Aaron and Lilly walked in the opposite

direction. Groups of people were watching. Suddenly Lilly swerved--in the middle of the road was a large black glisten of blood, trickling horribly. A wounded man had run from the blow and fallen here.

Aaron did not know where he was going. But in the Via Tournabuoni Lilly turned towards the Arno, and soon they were on the Ponte Santa Trinita.

"Who threw the bomb?" said Aaron.

"I suppose an anarchist."

"It's all the same," said Aaron.

The two men, as if unable to walk any further, leaned on the broad parapet of the bridge and looked at the water in the darkness of the still, deserted night. Aaron still had his flute section in his hand, his overcoat over his arm.

"Is that your flute?" asked Lilly.

"Bit of it. Smashed."

"Let me look."

He looked, and gave it back.

"No good," he said.

"Oh, no," said Aaron.

"Throw it in the river, Aaron," said Lilly.

Aaron turned and looked at him.

"Throw it in the river," repeated Lilly. "It's an end."

Aaron nervelessly dropped the flute into the stream. The two men stood leaning on the bridge-parapet, as if unable to move.

"We shall have to go home," said Lilly. "Tanny may hear of it and be anxious."

Aaron was quite dumbfounded by the night's event: the loss of his flute. Here was a blow he had not expected. And the loss was for him symbolic. It chimed with something in his soul: the bomb, the smashed flute, the end.

"There goes Aaron's Rod, then," he said to Lilly.

"It'll grow again. It's a reed, a water-plant--you can't kill it," said Lilly, unheeding.

"And me?"

"You'll have to live without a rod, meanwhile."

To which pleasant remark Aaron made no reply.