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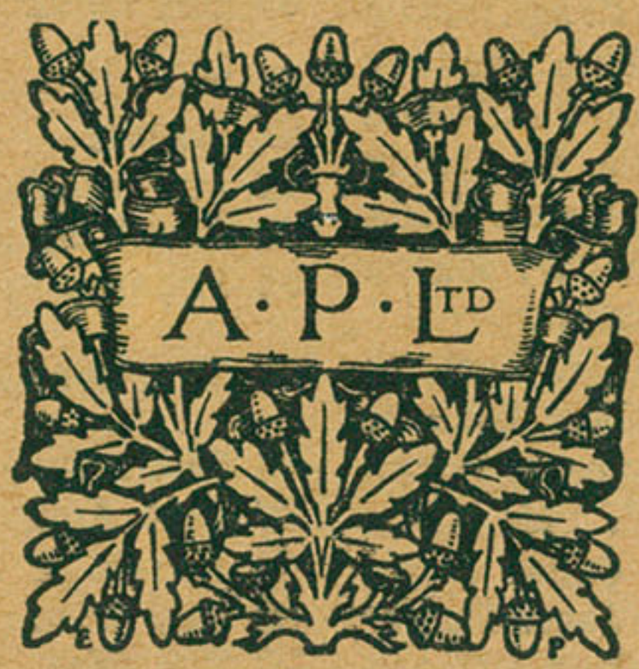
THE GIANT'S ROBE.



"Now does he feel his title
Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe
Upon a dwarfish thief.' —*Macbeth.*

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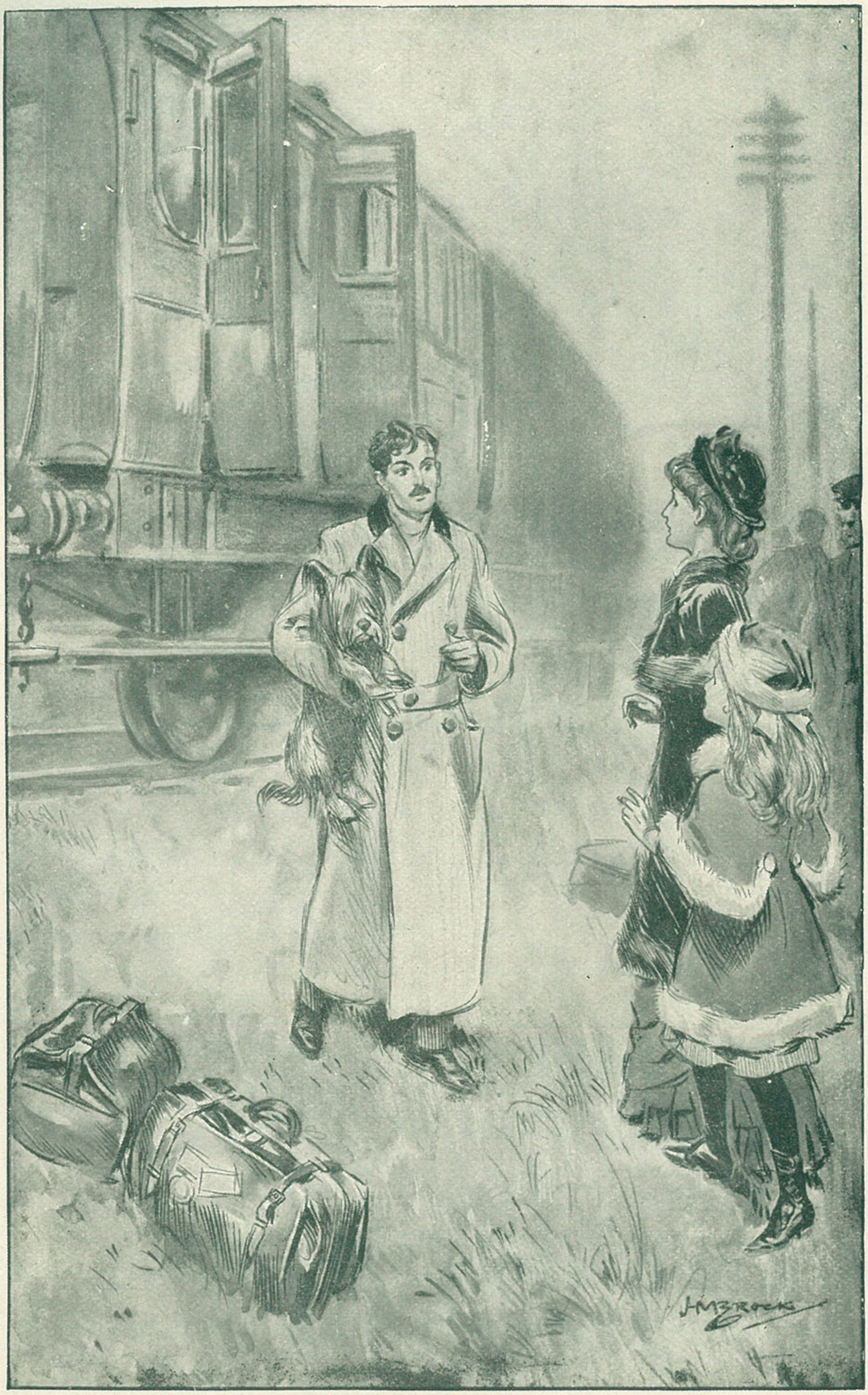

THE LITTLE TREMBLING DOG SAFE UNDER ONE ARM.

Frontispiece.] [*p.* 33

The GIANT'S ROBE

BY F. ANSTEY

Illustrated by H. M. Brock

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PREFACE

It has been my intention from the first to take this opportunity of stating that, if I am indebted to any previous work for the central idea of a stolen manuscript, such obligation should be ascribed to a short tale, published some time ago in one of the Christmas numbers—the only story upon the subject which I have read at present.

It was the story of a German student who, having found in the library of his university an old scientific manuscript, by a writer long since dead and forgotten, produced it as his own; and it is so probable that the recollection of this incident became quite unconsciously the germ of the present book that, although the matter is not of general importance, I feel it is only fair to mention it here.

I trust, nevertheless, that it is not necessary to insist upon any claim to the average degree of originality; for if the book does not bear the traces of honest and independent work, that is a defect which is scarcely likely to be removed by the most eloquent and argumentative of prefaces.

THE GIANT'S ROBE.

CHAPTER I.

AN INTERCESSOR.

In the heart of the City, but fended off from the roar and rattle of traffic by a ring of shops, and under the shadow of a smoke-begrimed classical church, stands—or rather stood, for they have removed it recently—the large public school of St. Peter's.

Entering the heavy old gate, against which the shops on both sides huddled close, you passed into the atmosphere of scholastic calm which, during working hours, pervades most places of education, and saw a long plain block of buildings, within which it was hard to believe, so deep was the silence, that some hundreds of boys were collected.

Even if you went down the broad stair to the school entrance and along the basement, where the bulk of the class-rooms was situated, there was only a faint hum to be heard from behind the numerous doors—until the red-waistcoated porter came out of his lodge and rang the big bell which told that the day's work was over.

Then nervous people who found themselves by any chance in the long dark corridors experienced an unpleasant sensation, as of a demon host in high spirits being suddenly let loose to do their will. The outburst was generally preceded by a dull murmur and rustle, which lasted for a few minutes after the clang of the bell had died away—then door after door opened and hordes of boys plunged out with wild shrieks of liberty, to scamper madly down the echoing flagstones.

For half an hour after that the place was a Babel of unearthly yells, whistles, and scraps of popular songs, with occasional charges and scuffles and a constant tramp of feet.

The higher forms on both the classical and modern sides took no part, of course, in these exuberances, and went soberly home in twos or threes, as became 'fellows in the Sixth.' But they were in the minority, and the Lower School boys and the 'Remove'—that bodyguard of strong limbs and thick heads which it seemed hopeless to remove any higher—were quite capable of supplying unaided all the noise that might be considered necessary; and, as there was no ill-humour and little roughness in their japes, they were very wisely allowed to let their steam off without interference. It did not last very long, though it died out gradually enough: first the songs and whistles became more isolated and distinct, and the hallooing and tramping less continued, until the *charivari* toned down almost entirely, the frightened silence came stealing back again, and the only sounds at last were the hurried run of the delinquents who had been 'run in' to the Detention Room, the slow footsteps of some of the masters, and the brooms of the old ladies who were cleaning up.

Such was the case at St. Peter's when this story begins. The stream of boys with shiny black bags had poured out through the gate and swelled the great human river; some of them were perhaps already at home and enlivening their families with the day's experiences, and those who had further to go were probably beguiling the tedium of travel by piling one another up in struggling heaps on the floors of various railway carriages, for the entertainment of those privileged to be their fellow-passengers.

Halfway down the main corridor I have mentioned was the 'Middle-Third' class-room, a big square room with dingy cream-coloured walls, high windows darkened with soot, and a small stained writing-table at one end, surrounded on three sides by ranks of rugged seasoned forms and sloping desks; round the walls were varnished lockers with a number painted on the lid of each, and a big square stove stood in one corner.

The only person in the room just then was the form-master, Mark Ashburn; and he was proposing to leave it almost immediately, for the close air and the strain of keeping order all day had given him a headache, and he was thinking that before walking homeward he would amuse himself with a magazine, or a gossip in the masters' room.

Mark Ashburn was a young man, almost the youngest on the school staff, and very decidedly the best-looking. He was tall and well made, with black hair and eloquent dark eyes, which had the gift of expressing rather more than a rigid examination would have found inside him—just now, for example, a sentimental observer would have read in their glance round the bare deserted room the passionate protest of a soul conscious of genius against the hard fate which had placed him there, whereas he was in reality merely wondering whose hat that was on the row of pegs opposite.

But if Mark was not a genius, there was a brilliancy in his manner that had something very captivating about it; an easy confidence in himself, that had the more merit because it had hitherto met with extremely small encouragement.

He dressed carefully, which was not without effect upon his class, for boys, without being over-scrupulous in the matter of their own costume, are apt to be critical of the garments of those in authority over them. To them he was 'an awful swell'; though he was not actually over-dressed—it was only that he liked to walk home along Piccadilly with the air of a man who had just left his club and had nothing particular to do.

He was not unpopular with his boys: he did not care twopence about any of them, but he felt it pleasant to be popular, and his careless good-nature secured that result without much effort on his part. They had a great respect for his acquirements too, speaking of him among themselves as 'jolly clever when he liked to show it'; for Mark was not above giving occasional indications of deep learning which were highly impressive. He went out of his way to do it, and was probably aware that the learning thus suggested would not stand any very severe test; but then there was no one there to apply it.

Any curiosity as to the last hat and coat on the wall was satisfied while he still sat at his desk, for the door, with its upper panels of corrugated glass protected by stout wire network—no needless precaution there—opened just then, and a small boy appeared, looking rather pale and uncomfortable, and holding a long sheet of blue foolscap in one hand.

'Hullo, Langton,' said Mark, as he saw him; 'so it's you; why, haven't you gone yet, eh? How's that?'

'Please sir,' began the boy, dolorously, 'I've got into an awful row—I'm run in, sir.'

'Ah!' said Mark; 'sorry for you—what is it?'

'Well, I didn't do anything,' said he. 'It was like this. I was going along the passage, and just passing Old Jemmy's—I mean Mr. Shelford's—door, and it was open. And there was a fellow standing outside, a bigger fellow than me, and he caught hold of me by the collar and ran me right in and shut the door and bolted. And Mr. Shelford came at me and boxed my ears, and said it wasn't the first time, and I should have a detention card for it. And so he gave me this, and I'm to go up to the Doctor with it and get it signed when it's done!'

And the boy held out the paper, at the top of which Mark read in old Shelford's tremulous hand—'Langton, 100 lines for outrageous impertinence.—J. Shelford.'

'If I go up, you know, sir,' said the boy, with a trembling lip, 'I'm safe for a swishing.'

'Well, I'm afraid you are,' agreed Mark, 'but you'd better make haste, hadn't you? or they'll close the Detention Room, and you'll only be worse off for waiting, you see.'

Mark was really rather sorry for him, though he had, as has been said, no great liking for boys; but this particular one, a round-faced, freckled boy, with honest eyes and a certain refinement in his voice and bearing that somehow suggested that he had a mother or sister who was a gentlewoman, was less objectionable to Mark than his fellows. Still he could not enter into his feelings sufficiently to guess why he was being appealed to in this way.

Young Langton half turned to go, dejectedly enough; then he came back and said, 'Please, sir, can't you help me? I shouldn't mind the—the swishing so much if I'd done anything. But I haven't.'

'What can I do?' asked Mark.

'If you wouldn't mind speaking to Mr. Shelford for me—he'd listen to you, and he won't to me.'

'He will have gone by this time,' objected Mark.

'Not if you make haste,' said the boy, eagerly.

Mark was rather flattered by this confidence in his persuasive powers: he liked the idea, too, of posing as the protector of his class, and the good-natured element in him made him the readier to yield.

'Well, we'll have a shot at it, Langton,' he said. 'I doubt if it's much good, you know, but here goes. When you get in, hold your tongue and keep in the background—leave it to me.'

So they went out into the long passage with its whitewashed walls and rows of doors on each side, and black barrel-vaulting above; at the end the glimmer of light came through the iron bars of the doorway, which had a prison-like suggestion about them, and the reflectors of the unlighted gas lamps that projected here and there along the corridor gave back the glimmer as a tiny spark in the centre of each metal disc.

Mark stopped at the door of the Upper Fourth Class-room, which was Mr. Shelford's, and went in. It was a plain room, not unlike his own, but rather smaller; it had a daïs with a somewhat larger desk for the master, and a different arrangement of the benches and lockers, but it was quite as gloomy, with an outlook into a grim area giving a glimpse of the pavement and railings above.

Mr. Shelford was evidently just going, for as they came in he had put a very large hat on the back of his head, and was winding a long grey comforter round his throat; but he took off the hat courteously as he saw Mark. He was a little old man, with a high brick-red colour on his smooth, scarcely wrinkled cheeks, a big aquiline nose, a wide thin-lipped mouth, and sharp little grey eyes, which he cocked sideways at one like an angry parrot.

Langton retired to a form out of hearing, and sat down on one end of it, nursing his detention paper anxiously.

'Well, Ashburn,' began the Reverend James Shelford, 'is there anything I can do for *you?*'

'Why,' said Mark, 'the fact is, I——'

'Eh, what?' said the elder. 'Wait a minute—there's that impident fellow back again! I thought I'd seen the last of him. Here, you sir, didn't I send you up for a flogging?'

'I—I believe you did, sir,' said Langton with extreme deference.

'Well, why ain't you *getting* that flogging—eh, sir? No impidence, now—just tell me, why ain't you being flogged? You ought to be in the middle of it now!'

'Well, you see,' said Mark, 'he's one of *my* boys——'

'I don't care whose boy he is,' said the other, testily; 'he's an impident fellow, sir.'

'I don't think he is, really,' said Mark.

'D'ye know what he did, then? Came whooping and shouting and hullabalooing into my room, for all the world as if it was his own nursery, sir. He's *always* doing it!'

'I never did it before,' protested Langdon, 'and it wasn't my fault this time.'

'Wasn't your fault! You haven't got St. Vitus' dance, have you? I never heard there were any tanantula spiders here. You don't go dancing into the Doctor's room, do you? *He'll* give you a dancing lesson!' said the old gentleman, sitting down again to chuckle, and looking very like Mr. Punch.

'No, but allow me,' put in Mark; 'I assure you this boy is——'

'I know what you're going to tell me—he's a model boy, of course. It's singular what shoals of model boys *do* come dancing in here under some irresistible impulse after school. I'll put a stop to it now I've caught one. You don't know 'em as well as I do, sir, you don't know 'em—they're all impident and all liars—some are cleverer at it than others, and that's all.'

'I'm afraid that's true enough,' said Mark, who did not like being considered inexperienced.

'Yes, it's cruel work having to do with boys, sir—cruel and thankless. If ever I try to help a boy in my class I think is trying to get on and please me, what does he do? Turn round and play me some scurvy trick, just to prove to the others he's not currying favour. And then they insult me—why, that very boy has been and shouted "Shellfish" through my keyhole many a time, I'll warrant!'

'I think you're mistaken,' said Mark, soothingly.

'You do? I'll ask him. Here, d'ye mean to tell me you never called out "Shellfish" or—or other opprobrious epithets into my door, sir?' And he inclined his ear for the answer with his eyes fixed on the boy's face.

'Not "Shellfish,"' said the boy; 'I did "Prawn" once. But that was long ago.'

Mark gave him up then, with a little contempt for such injudicious candour.

'Oh!' said Mr. Shelford, catching him, but not ungently, by the ear. '"Prawn," eh? "Prawn"; hear that, Ashburn? Perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me *why* "Prawn"?

A natural tendency of the youthful mind to comparative physiology had discovered a fancied resemblance which justified any graceful personalities of this kind; but Langton probably felt that candour had its limits, and that this was a question that required judgment in dealing with it.

'Because—because I've heard other fellows call you that,' he replied.

'Ah, and why do *they* call me Prawn, eh?'

'I never heard them give any reason,' said the boy, diplomatically.

Mr. Shelford let the boy go with another chuckle, and Langton retired to his form again out of earshot.

'Yes, Ashburn,' said old Jemmy, 'that's the name they have for me—one of 'em. "Prawn" and "Shellfish"—they yell it out after me as I'm going home, and then run away. And I've had to bear it thirty years.'

'Young ruffians,' said Mark, as if the sobriquets were wholly unknown to the masters' room.

'Ah, they do, though; and the other day, when my monitor opened the desk in the morning, there was a great impident kitten staring me in the face. He'd put it in there himself, I dare say, to annoy me.'

He did not add that he had sent out for some milk for the intruder, and had nursed it on his old knees during morning school, after which he showed it out with every consideration for its feelings; but it was the case nevertheless, for his years amongst boys had still left a soft place in his heart, though he got little credit for it.

'Yes, it's a wearing life, sir, a wearing life,' he went on with less heat, 'hearing generations of stoopid boys all blundering at the same stiff places, and worrying over the same old passages. I'm getting very tired of it; I'm an old man now. "Occidit miseros crambe"—eh, you know how it goes on?'

'Yes, yes,' said Mark, 'quite so,'—though he had but a dim recollection of the line in question.

'Talking of verses,' said the other, 'I hear we're to have the pleasure of seeing one of your productions on Speech-night this year. Is that so?'

'I was not aware anything was settled,' said Mark, flushing with pleasure. 'I did lay a little thing of my own, a sort of allegorical Christmas piece—a *masque*, don't you know—before the Doctor and the Speeches Committee, but I haven't heard anything definite yet.'

'Oh, perhaps I'm premature,' said Mr. Shelford; 'perhaps I'm premature.'

'Do you mind telling me if you've heard anything said about it?' asked Mark, thoroughly interested.

'I did hear some talk about it in the luncheon hour. You weren't in the room, I believe, but I think they were to come to a decision this afternoon.'

'Then it will be all over by now,' said Mark; 'there may be a note on my desk about it. I—I think I'll go and see, if you'll excuse me.'

And he left the room hastily, quite forgetting his original purpose in entering: something much more important to him than whether a boy should be flogged or not, when he had no doubt richly deserved it, was pending just then, and he could not rest until he knew the result.

For Mark had always longed for renown of some sort, and for the last few years literary distinction had seemed the most open to him. He had sought it by more ambitious attempts, but even the laurels which the performance of a piece of his by boy-actors on a Speech-day might bring him had become desirable; and though he had written and submitted his work confidently and carelessly enough, he found himself not a little anxious and excited as the time for a decision drew near.

It was a small thing; but if it did nothing else it would procure him a modified fame in the school and the masters' room, and Mark Ashburn had never felt resigned to be a nonentity anywhere.

Little wonder, then, that Langton's extremity faded out of his mind as he hurried back to his class-room, leaving that unlucky small boy still in his captor's clutches.

The old clergyman put on the big hat again when Mark had gone, and stood up peering over the desk at his prisoner.

'Well, if you don't want to be locked up here all night, you'd better be off,' he remarked.

'To the Detention Room, sir?' faltered the boy.

'You know the way, I believe? If

not, I can show you,' said the old gentleman politely.

'But really and truly,' pleaded Langton, 'I didn't do anything this time. I was shoved in.'

'Who shoved you in? Come, you know well enough; you're going to lie, I can see. Who was he?'

It is not improbable that Langton *was* going to lie that time—his code allowed it—but he felt checked somehow.

'Well, I only know the fellow by name,' he said at last.

'Well, and *what's* his name? Out with it; I'll give him a detention card instead.'

'I can't tell you that,' said the boy in a lower voice.

'And why not, ye impident fellow? You've just said you knew it. Why not?'

'Because it would be sneakish,' said Langton boldly.

'Oh, "sneakish," would it?' said old Jemmy. '"Sneakish," eh? Well, well, I'm getting old, I forget these things. Perhaps it would. I don't know what it is to insult an old man—that's fair enough, I dare say. And so you want me to let you off being whipped, eh?'

'Yes, when I've done nothing.'

'And if I let you off you'll come gallopading in here as lively as ever to-morrow, calling out "Shellfish"—no, I forgot—"Prawn's" *your* favourite epithet, ain't it?—calling out "Prawn" under my very nose.'

'No, I shan't,' said the boy.

'Well, I'll take your word for it, whatever that's worth,' and he tore up the compromising paper. 'Run off home to your tea, and don't bother me any more.'

Langton escaped, full of an awed joy at his wonderful escape, and old Mr. Shelford locked his desk, got out the big hook-nosed umbrella, which had contracted a strong resemblance to himself, and went too.

'That's a nice boy,' he muttered—'wouldn't tell tales, wouldn't he? But I dare say he was taking me in all the time. He'll be able to tell the other young scamps how neatly he got over "old Jemmy." I don't think he will, though. I can still tell when a boy's lying—I've had plenty of opportunities.'

Meanwhile Mark had gone back to his class-room. One of the porters ran after him with a note, and he opened it eagerly, only to be disappointed, for it was not from the committee. It was dated from Lincoln's Inn, and came from his friend Holroyd.

'Dear Ashburn,' the note ran, 'don't forget your promise to look in here on your way home. You know it's the last time we shall walk back together, and there's a favour I want to ask of you before saying good-bye. I shall be at chambers till five, as I am putting my things together.'

'I will go round presently,' he thought. 'I must say good-bye some time to-day, and it will be a bore to turn out after dinner.'

As he stood reading the note, young Langton passed him, bag in hand, with a bright and grateful face.

'Please sir,' he said, saluting him, 'thanks awfully for getting Mr. Shelford to let me off; he wouldn't have done it but for you.'

'Oh, ah,' said Mark, suddenly remembering his errand of mercy, 'to be sure, yes. So, he has let you off, has he? Well, I'm very glad I was of use to you, Langton. It was a hard fight, wasn't it? That's enough, get along home, and let me find you better up in your Nepos than you were yesterday.'

Beyond giving the boy his company in facing his judge for the second time, Mark, as will have been observed, had not been a very energetic advocate; but as Langton was evidently unaware of the fact, Mark himself was the last person to allude to it. Gratitude, whether earned or not, was gratitude, and always worth accepting.

'By Jove,' he thought to himself with half-ashamed amusement, 'I forgot all about the little beggar; left him to the tender mercies of old Prawn. All's well that ends well, anyhow!'

As he stood by the *grille* at the porter's lodge, the old Prawn himself passed slowly out, with his shoulders bent, and his old eyes staring straight before him with an absent, lack-lustre expression in them. Perhaps he was thinking that life might have been more cheerful for him if his wife Mary had lived, and he had had her and boys like that young Langton to meet him when his wearisome day was over, instead of being childless and a widower, and returning to the lonely, dingy house which he occupied as the incumbent of a musty church hard by.

Whatever he thought of, he was too engaged to notice Mark, who followed him with his eyes as he slowly worked his way up the flight of stone steps which led to the street level. 'Shall *I*

ever come to that?' he thought. 'If I stay here all my life, I *may*. Ah, there's Gilbertson—he can tell me about this Speech-day business.'

Gilbertson was a fellow-master, and one of the committee for arranging the Speech-day entertainment. For the rest he was a nervously fussy little man, and met Mark with evident embarrassment.

'Well, Gilbertson,' said Mark, as unconcernedly as he could, 'settled your programme yet?'

'Er—oh, yes, quite settled—quite; that is, not definitely as yet.'

'And—my little production?'

'Oh, ah, to be sure, yes, your little production. We all liked it very much—oh, exceedingly so—the Doctor especially—charmed with it, my dear Ashburn, charmed!'

'Very glad to hear it,' said Mark, with a sudden thrill; 'and—and have you decided to take it, then?'

'Well,' said Mr. Gilbertson, looking at the pavement all round him, 'you see, the fact is, the Doctor thought, and some of us thought so too, that a piece to be acted by boys should have a leetle more—eh? and not quite so much—so much of what yours has, and a few of those little natural touches, you know—but you see what I mean, don't you?'

'It would be a capital piece with half that in it,' said Mark, trying to preserve his temper, 'but I could easily alter it, you know, Gilbertson.'

'No, no,' said Gilbertson eagerly, 'you mustn't think of it; you'd spoil it; we couldn't hear of it, and—and it won't be necessary to trouble you. Because, you see, the Doctor thought it was a little long, and not quite light enough; and not exactly the sort of thing we want, but we all admired it.'

'But it won't do? Is that what you mean?'

'Why—er—nothing definite at present. We are going to write you a letter about it. Good-bye, good-bye! Got a train to catch at Ludgate Hill.'

And he bustled away, glad to escape, for he had not counted upon having to announce a rejection in person.

Mark stood looking after him, with a slightly dazed feeling. *That* was over, then. He had written works which he felt persuaded had only to become known to bring him fame; but for all that it seemed that he was not considered worthy to entertain a Speech-night audience at a London public school.

Hitherto Mark's life had contained more of failure than success. From St. Peter's he had gone to a crammer's to be prepared for the Indian Civil Service, and an easy pass had been anticipated for him even at the first trial. Unfortunately, however, his name came out low down on the list—a disaster which he felt must be wiped out at all hazards, and, happening to hear of an open scholarship that was to be competed for at a Cambridge college, he tried for it, and this time was successful. A well-to-do uncle, who had undertaken the expenses hitherto, was now induced to consent to the abandonment of the Civil Service in favour of a University career, and Mark entered upon it accordingly with fair prospects of distinction, if he read with even ordinary steadiness.

This he had done during his first year, though he managed to get a fair share of enjoyment out of his life, but then something happened to change the whole current of his ambitions—he composed a college skit which brought him considerable local renown, and from that moment was sought as a contributor to sundry of those ephemeral undergraduate periodicals which, in their short life, are so universally reviled and so eagerly read.

Mark's productions, imitative and crude as they necessarily were, had admirers who strengthened his own conviction that literature was his destiny; the tripos faded into the background, replaced by the more splendid vision of seeing an accepted article from his pen in a real London magazine; he gave frantic chase to the will o' the wisp of literary fame, which so many pursue all their lives in vain, fortunate if it comes at last to flicker for a while over their graves.

With Mark the results were what might have been expected: his papers in his second year examinations were so bad that he received a solemn warning that his scholarship was in some danger, though he was not actually deprived of it, and finally, instead of the good class his tutor had once expected, he took a low third, and left Cambridge in almost as bad a plight as Arthur Pendennis.

Now he had found himself forced to accept a third-form mastership in his old school, where it seemed that, if he was no longer a disciple, he was scarcely a prophet.

But all this had only fanned his ambition. He would show the world

there was something in him still; and he began to send up articles to various London magazines, and to keep them going like a juggler's oranges, until his productions obtained a fair circulation, in manuscript.

Now and then a paper of his did gain the honours of publication, so that his disease did not die out, as happens with some. He went on, writing whatever came into his head, and putting his ideas out in every variety of literary mould—from blank-verse tragedy to a sonnet, and a three-volume novel to a society paragraph—with equal ardour and facility, and very little success.

For he believed in himself implicitly. At present he was still before the outwork of prejudice which must be stormed by every conscript in the army of literature: that he would carry it eventually he did not doubt. But this disappointment about the committee hit him hard for a moment; it seemed like a forecast of a greater disaster. Mark, however, was of a sanguine temperament, and it did not take him long to remount his own pedestal. 'After all,' he thought, 'what does it matter? If my "Sweet Bells Jangled" is only taken, I sha'n't care about anything else. And there is some of my best work in that, too. I'll go round to Holroyd, and forget this business.'

CHAPTER II.

A LAST WALK.

Mark turned in from Chancery Lane under the old gateway, and went to one of the staircase doorways with the old curly eighteenth-century numerals cut on the centre-stone of the arch and painted black. The days of these picturesque old dark-red buildings, with their small-paned dusty windows, their turrets and angles, and other little architectural surprises and inconveniences, are already numbered. Soon the sharp outline of their old gables and chimneys will cut the sky no longer; but some unpractical persons will be found who, although (or it may be *because*) they did not occupy them, will see them fall with a pang, and remember them with a kindly regret.

A gas jet was glimmering here and there behind the slits of dusty glass in the turret staircase as Mark came in, although it was scarcely dusk in the outer world; for Old Square is generally a little in advance in this respect. He passed the door laden with names and shining black plates announcing removals, till he came to an entrance on the second floor, where one of the names on a dingy ledge above the door was 'Mr. Vincent Holroyd.'

If Mark had been hitherto a failure, Vincent Holroyd could not be pronounced a success. He had been, certainly, more distinguished at college; but after taking his degree, reading for the Bar, and being called, three years had passed in forced inactivity—not, perhaps, an altogether unprecedented circumstance in a young barrister's career, but with the unpleasant probability, in his case, of a continued brieflessness. A dry and reserved manner, due to a secret shyness, had kept away many whose friendship might have been useful to him; and, though he was aware of this, he could not overcome the feeling; he was a lonely man, and had become enamoured of his loneliness. Of the interest popularly believed to be indispensable to a barrister he could command none, and, with more than the average amount of ability, the opportunity for displaying it was denied him; so that when he was suddenly called upon to leave England for an indefinite time, he was able to abandon prospects that were not brilliant without any particular reluctance.

Mark found him tying up his few books and effects in the one chamber which he had sub-rented, a little panelled room looking out on Chancery Lane, and painted the pea-green colour which, with a sickly buff, seem set apart for professional decoration.

His face, which was dark and somewhat plain, with large, strong features, had a pleasant look on it as he turned to meet Mark. 'I'm glad you could come,' he said. 'I thought we'd walk back together for the last time. I shall be ready in one minute. I'm only getting my law books together.'

'You're not going to take them out to Ceylon with you, then?'

'Not now. Brandon—my landlord, you know—will let me keep them here till I send for them. I've just seen him. Shall we go now?'

They passed out through the dingy, gas-lit clerk's room, and Holroyd stopped for a minute to speak to the clerk, a mild, pale man, who was neatly copying out an opinion at the foot of a case.

'Good-bye, Tucker,' he said. 'I don't suppose I shall see you again for some time.'

'Good-bye, Mr. 'Olroyd, sir. Very sorry to lose you. I hope you'll have a pleasant voy'ge, and get on over there, sir, better than you've done 'ere, sir.'

The clerk spoke with a queer mixture of patronage and deference: the deference was his ordinary manner with his employer in chief, a successful Chancery junior, and the patronage was caused by a pitying contempt he felt for a young man who had not got on.

'That 'Olroyd 'll never do anything at the Bar,' he used to say when comparing notes with his friend the clerk to the opposite set of chambers. 'He's got no push, and he's got no manner, and there ain't nobody at his back. What he ever come to the Bar for at all, *I* don't know!'

There were some directions to be given as to letters and papers, which the mild clerk received with as much gravity as though he were not inwardly thinking, 'I'd eat all papers as ever come in for *you*, and want dinner after 'em.' And then Holroyd left his chambers for the last time, and he and Mark went down the rickety winding stair, and out under the colonnade of the Vice-Chancellors' courts, at the closed doors of which a few clerks and reporters were copying down the cause list for the next day.

They struck across Lincoln's Inn Fields and Long Acre, towards Piccadilly and Hyde Park. It was by no means a typical November afternoon: the sky was a delicate blue and the air mild, with just enough of autumn keenness in it to remind one, not unpleasantly, of the real time of year.

'Well,' said Holroyd, rather sadly, 'you and I won't walk together like this again for a long time.'

'I suppose not,' said Mark, with a regret that sounded a little formal, for their approaching separation did not, as a matter of fact, make him particularly unhappy.

Holroyd had always cared for him much more than he had cared for Holroyd, for whom Mark's friendship had been a matter of circumstance rather than deliberate preference. They had been quartered in the same lodgings at Cambridge, and had afterwards 'kept' on the same staircase in college, which had led to a more or less daily companionship, a sort of intimacy that is not always strong enough to bear transplantation to town.

Holroyd had taken care that it should survive their college days; for he had an odd liking for Mark, in spite of a tolerably clear insight into his character. Mark had a way of inspiring friendships without much effort on his part, and this undemonstrative, self-contained man felt an affection for him which was stronger than he ever allowed himself to show.

Mark, for his part, had begun to feel an increasing constraint in the company of a friend who had an unpleasantly keen eye for his weak points, and with whom he was always conscious of a certain inferiority which, as he could discover no reason for it, galled his vanity the more.

His careless tone wounded Holroyd, who had hoped for some warmer response; and they walked on in silence until they turned into Hyde Park and crossed to Rotten Row, when Mark said, 'By the way, Vincent, wasn't there something you wanted to speak to me about?'

'I wanted to ask a favour of you; it won't give you much trouble,' said Holroyd.

'Oh, in that case, if it's anything I *can* do, you know—but what is it?'

'Well,' said Holroyd, 'the fact is—I never told a soul till now—but I've written a book.'

'Never mind, old boy,' said Mark, with a light laugh; for the confession, or perhaps a certain embarrassment with which it was made, seemed to put Holroyd more on a level with himself. 'So have lots of fellows, and no one thinks any the worse of them—unless they print it. Is it a law book?'

'Not exactly,' said Holroyd; 'it's a romance.'

'A romance!' cried Mark. 'You!'

'Yes,' said Holroyd, 'I. I've always been something of a dreamer, and I amused myself by putting one of my dreams down on paper. I wasn't disturbed.'

'You've been called, though, haven't you?'

'I never got up,' said Holroyd, with a rather melancholy grimace. 'I began well enough. I used to come up to chambers by ten and leave at half-past six, after noting up reports and textbooks all day; but no solicitor seemed struck by my industry. Then I sat in court and took down judgments most elaborately, but no leader ever asked *me* to take notes for him, and I never got a chance of suggesting anything to the

court as *amicus curiæ*, for both the Vice-Chancellors seemed able to get along pretty well without me. Then I got tired of that, and somehow this book got into my head, and I couldn't rest till I'd got it out again. It's finished now, and I'm lonely again.'

'And you want me to run my eyes over it and lick it into shape a little?' said Mark.

'Not quite that,' said Holroyd; 'it must stand as it is. What I'm going to ask you is this: I don't know any fellow I would care to ask but yourself. I want it published. I shall be out of England, probably with plenty of other matters to occupy me for some time. I want you to look after the manuscript for me while I'm away. Do you mind taking the trouble?'

'Not a bit, old fellow,' said Mark, 'no trouble in the world; only tying up the parcel each time, sending it off again. Well, I didn't mean that; but it's no trouble, really.'

'I dare say you won't be called upon to see it through the press,' said Holroyd; 'but if such a thing as an acceptance should happen, I should like you to make all the arrangements. You've had some experience in these things, and I haven't, and I shall be away too.'

'I'll do the best I can,' said Mark. 'What sort of a book is it?'

'It's a romance, as I said,' said Holroyd. 'I don't know that I can describe it more exactly: it——'

'Oh, it doesn't matter,' interrupted Mark. 'I can read it some time. What have you called it?'

'"Glamour,"' said Holroyd, still with a sensitive shrinking at having to reveal what had long been a cherished secret.

'It isn't a society novel, I suppose?'

'No,' said Holroyd. 'I'm not much of a society man; I go out very little.'

'But you ought to, you know: you'll find people very glad to see you if you only cultivate them.'

There was something, however, in Mark's manner of saying this that suggested a consciousness that this might be a purely personal experience.

'Shall I?' said Holroyd. 'I don't know. People are kind enough, but they can only be really glad to see any one who is able to amuse them or interest them, and that's natural enough. I can't flatter myself that I'm particularly interesting or amusing; any way, it's too late to think about that now.'

'You won't be able to do the hermit much over in Ceylon, will you?'

'I don't know. My father's plantation is in rather a remote part of the island. I don't think he has ever been very intimate with the other planters near him, and as I left the place when I was a child I have fewer friends there than here even. But there will be plenty to do if I am to learn the business, as he seems to wish.'

'Did he never think of having you over before?'

'He wanted me to come over and practise at the Colombo Bar, but that was soon after I was called, and I preferred to try my fortune in England first. I was the second son, you see, and while my brother John was alive I was left pretty well to my own devices. I went, as you know, to Colombo in my second Long, but only for a few weeks, of course, and my father and I didn't get on together somehow. But he's ill now, and poor John died of dysentery, and he's alone, so even if I had had any practice to leave I could hardly refuse to go out to him. As it is, as far as that is concerned, I have nothing to keep me.'

They were walking down Rotten Row as Holroyd said this, with the dull leaden surface of the Serpentine on their right, and away to the left, across the tan and the grey sward, the Cavalry Barracks, with their long narrow rows of gleaming windows. Up the long convex surface of the Row a faint white mist was crawling, and a solitary, spectral-looking horseman was cantering noiselessly out of it towards them. The evening had almost begun; the sky had changed to a delicate green tint, merged towards the west in a dusky crocus, against which the Memorial spire stood out sharp and black; from South Kensington came the sound of a church bell calling for some evening service.

'Doesn't that bell remind you somehow of Cambridge days?' said Mark. 'I could almost fancy we were walking up again from the boats, and that was the chapel bell ringing.'

'I wish we were,' said Holroyd with a sigh: 'they were good old times, and they will never come back.'

'You're very low, old fellow,' said Mark, 'for a man going back to his native country.'

'Ah, but I don't feel as if it was my native country, you see. I've lived here so long. And no one knows me out there except my poor old father, and we're almost strangers. I'm leaving the few people I care for behind me.'

'Oh, it will be all right,' said Mark, with the comfortable view one takes of another's future; 'you'll get on well enough. We shall have you a rich coffee-planter, or a Deputy Judge Advocate, in no time. *Any* fellow has a chance out there. And you'll soon make friends in a place like that.'

'I like my friends ready-made, I think,' said Holroyd; 'but one must make the best of it, I suppose.'

They had come to the end of the Row; the gates of Kensington Gardens were locked, and behind the bars a policeman was watching them suspiciously, as if he suspected they might attempt a forcible entry.

'Well,' said Mark, stopping, 'I suppose you turn off here?'

Holroyd would have been willing to go on with him as far as Kensington had Mark proposed it, but he gave no sign of desiring this, so his friend's pride kept him silent too.

'One word more about the—the book,' he said. 'I may put your name and address on the title-page, then? It goes off to Chilton and Fladgate to-night.'

'Oh yes, of course,' said Mark, 'put whatever you like.'

'I've not given them my real name, and, if anything comes of it, I should like that kept a secret.'

'Just as you please; but why?'

'If I keep on at the Bar, a novel, whether it's a success or not, is not the best bait for briefs,' said Holroyd; 'and besides, if I am to get a slating, I'd rather have it under an *alias*, don't you see? So the only name on the title-page is "Vincent Beauchamp."'

'Very well,' said Mark, 'none shall know till you choose to tell them, and, if anything has to be done about the book, I'll see to it with pleasure, and write to you when it's settled. So you can make your mind easy about *that*.'

'Thanks,' said Holroyd; 'and now, good-bye, Mark.'

There was real feeling in his voice, and Mark himself caught something of it as he took the hand Vincent held out.

'Good-bye, old boy,' he said. 'Take care of yourself—pleasant voyage and good luck. You're no letter-writer, I know, but you'll drop me a line now and then, I hope. What's the name of the ship you go out in?'

'The "Mangalore." She leaves the Docks to-morrow. Good-bye for the present, Mark. We shall see one another again, I hope. Don't forget all about me before that.'

'No, no,' said Mark; 'we've been friends too long for that.'

One more good-bye, a momentary English awkwardness in getting away from one another, and they parted, Holroyd walking towards Bayswater across the bridge, and Mark making for Queen's Gate and Kensington.

Mark looked after his friend's tall strong figure for a moment before it disappeared in the dark. 'Well, I've seen the last of him,' he thought. 'Poor old Holroyd! to think of his having written a book—he's one of those unlucky beggars who never make a hit at anything. I expect I shall have some trouble about it by-and-by.'

Holroyd walked on with a heavier heart. 'He won't miss me,' he told himself. 'Will Mabel say good-bye like that?'

CHAPTER III.

GOOD-BYE.

On the same afternoon in which we have seen Mark and Vincent walk home together for the last time, Mrs. Langton and her eldest daughter Mabel were sitting in the pretty drawing-room of their house in Kensington Park Gardens.

Mrs. Langton was the wife of a successful Q.C. at the Chancery Bar, and one of those elegantly languid women with a manner charming enough to conceal a slight shallowness of mind and character; she was pretty still, and an invalid at all times when indisposition was not positively inconvenient.

It was one of her 'at home' days, but fewer people than usual had made their appearance, and these had filtered away early, leaving traces of their presence behind them in the confidential grouping of seats and the teacups left high and dry in various parts of the room.

Mrs. Langton was leaning luxuriously back in a low soft chair, lazily watching the firebeams glisten through the glass screen, and Mabel was on a couch near the window trying to read a magazine by the fading light.

'Hadn't you better ring for the lamps, Mabel?' suggested her mother. 'You can't possibly see to read by this light, and it's so trying for the eyes. I suppose no one else will call now, but it's very strange that Vincent should not have come to say good-bye.'

'Vincent doesn't care about "at homes,"' said Mabel.

'Still, not to say good-bye—after knowing us so long, too! and I'm sure we've tried to show him every kindness. Your father was always having solicitors to meet him at dinner, and it was never any use; and he sails to-morrow. I think he *might* have found time to come!'

'So do I,' agreed Mabel. 'It's not like Vincent, though he was always shy and odd in some things. He hasn't been to see us nearly so much lately, but I can't believe he will really go away without a word.'

Mrs. Langton yawned delicately. 'It would not surprise me, I must say,' she said. 'When a young man sets himself ——' but whatever she was going to say was broken off by the entrance of her youngest daughter Dolly, with the German governess, followed by the man bearing rose-shaded lamps.

Dolly was a vivacious child of about nine, with golden locks which had a pretty ripple in them, and deep long-lashed eyes that promised to be dangerous one day. 'We took Frisk out without the leash, mummy,' she cried, 'and when we got into Westbourne Grove he ran away. Wasn't it too bad of him?'

'Never mind, darling, he'll come back quite safe—he always does.'

'Ah, but it's his running away that I mind,' said Dolly; 'and you know what a dreadful state he always *will* come back in. He must be cured of doing it somehow.'

'Talk to him very seriously about it, Dolly,' said Mabel.

'I've tried that—and he only cringes and goes and does it again directly he's washed. I know what I'll do, Mabel. When he comes back this time, he shall have a jolly good whacking!'

'My *dear* child,' cried Mrs. Langton, 'what a dreadful expression!'

'Colin says it,' said Dolly, though she was quite aware that Colin was hardly a purist in his expressions.

'Colin says a good many things that are not pretty in a little girl's mouth.'

'So he does,' said Dolly cheerfully. 'I wonder if he knows? I'll go and tell him of it—he's come home.' And she ran off just as the door-bell rang.

'Mabel, I really think that must be some one else coming to call, after all. Do you know, I feel so tired and it's so late, that I think I will leave you and Fräulein to talk to them. Papa and I are going out to dinner to-night, and I must rest a little before I begin to dress. I'll run away while I can.'

Mrs. Langton fluttered gracefully out of the room as the butler crossed the hall to open the door, evidently to a visitor, and presently Mabel heard 'Mr. Holroyd' announced.

'So you really have come after all,' said Mabel, holding out her hand with a pretty smile of welcome. 'Mamma and I thought you meant to go away without a word.'

'You might have known me better than that,' said Holroyd.

'But when your last afternoon in England was nearly over and no sign of you, there *was* some excuse for thinking so; but you have come at last, so we won't scold you. Will you have some tea? It isn't very warm, I'm afraid, but you are so late, you know. Ring, and you shall have some fit to drink.'

Vincent accepted tea, chiefly because he wanted to be waited upon once more by her with the playful, gracious manner, just tinged with affectionate mockery, which he knew so well; and then he talked to her and Fräulein Mozer, with a heavy sense of the unsatisfactory nature of this triangular conversation for a parting interview.

The governess felt this too. She had had a shrewd suspicion for some time of the state of Holroyd's feelings towards Mabel, and felt a sentimental pity for him, condemned as he was to disguise them under ordinary afternoon conversation.

'He is going away,' she thought; 'but he shall have his chance, the poor young man. You will not think it very rude, Mr. Holroyd,' she said, rising: 'it will not disturb you if I practise? There is a piece which I am to play at a school concert to-morrow, and do not yet know it.'

'Vincent won't mind, Ottilia dear,' said Mabel. 'Will you, Vincent?' So the governess went to the further room where the piano stood, and was soon performing a conveniently noisy German march. Vincent sat still for some moments watching Mabel. He wished to keep in his memory the impression of her face as he saw it then, lighted up by the soft glow of the heavily shaded lamp at her elbow; a spirited and yet tender face, with dark-grey eyes, a sensitive, beautiful mouth, and brown hair with threads of gold in it which gleamed in the lamplight as she turned her graceful head.

He knew it would fade only too soon,

as often happens with the face we best love and have reason chiefly to remember. Others will rise unbidden with the vividness of a photograph, but the *one* face eludes us more and more, till no effort of the mind will call it up with any distinctness.

Mabel was the first to speak. 'Are you *very* fond of music, Vincent?' she said a little maliciously. 'Would you rather be allowed to listen in peace, or talk? You *may* talk, you know.'

'I came late on purpose to see as much of you as possible,' said poor Vincent. 'This is the last time I shall be able to talk to you for so long.'

'I know,' said Mabel simply; 'I'm very sorry, Vincent.' But there was only a frank friendliness in her eyes as she spoke, nothing more, and Vincent knew it.

'So am I,' he said. 'Do you know, Mabel, I have no photograph of you. Will you give me one to take away with me?'

'Of course, if I have one,' she said, as she went to a table for an album. 'Oh, Vincent, I'm so sorry. I'm afraid there's not one left. But I can give you one of mother and father and Dolly, and I think Colin too.'

'I should like all those very much,' said Vincent, who could not accept this offer as a perfect substitute, 'but can't you find one of yourself, not even an old one?'

'I think I can give you one after all,' said Mabel; 'wait a minute.' And as she came back after a minute's absence she said, 'Here's one I had promised to Gilda Featherstone, but Gilda can wait, and you can't. I'll give you an envelope to put then all in, and then we will talk. Tell me first how long you are going to be away?

'No longer than I can help,' said Vincent, 'but it depends on so many things.'

'But you will write to us, won't you?'

'Will you answer if I do?'

'Of course,' said Mabel. 'Don't you remember when I was a little girl, and used to write to you at school, and at Trinity too? I was always a better correspondent than you were, Vincent.'

Just then Dolly came, holding a cage of lovebirds. 'Champion said you were here,' she began. 'Vincent, wait till I put Jachin and Boaz down. Now you can kiss me. I knew you wouldn't go away without saying good-bye to me. You haven't seen my birds, have you? Papa gave them to me. They're such chilly birds, I brought them in here to get warm.'

'They're very much alike,' said Vincent, looking into the cage, upon which each bird instantly tried to hide its head in the sand underneath the other.

'They're exactly the same,' said Dolly, 'so I never know which is Jachin and which is Boaz; but they don't know their own names, and if they did they wouldn't answer to them, so it doesn't matter so much after all, *does* it?'

As it never occurred to Dolly that anybody could have the bad taste to prefer any one else's conversation to her own, she took entire possession of Vincent, throwing herself into the couch nearest to him, and pouring out her views on lovebirds generally on his absent ear.

'They don't know me yet,' she concluded, 'but then I've only had them six months. Do you know, Harold Caffyn says they're little humbugs, and kiss one another only when people look at them. I *have* caught them fighting dreadfully myself. I don't think lovebirds ought to fight. Do you? Oh, and Harold says that when one dies I ought to time the other and see how long it takes him to pine away; but Harold is always saying horrid things like that.'

'Dolly dear,' cried the governess from the inner room, 'will you run and ask Colin if he has taken away the metronome to the schoolroom?'

Dolly danced out to hunt for that prosaic instrument in a desultory way, and then forgot it in some dispute with Colin, who generally welcomed any distraction whilst preparing his schoolwork—a result which Fräulein Mozer probably took into account, particularly as she had the metronome by her side at the time. 'Poor Mr. Vincent!' she thought; 'he has not come to talk with Dolly of lovebirds.'

'You will be sure to write and tell us all about yourself,' said Mabel. 'What do you mean to do out there, Vincent?'

'Turn coffee-planter, perhaps,' he said gloomily.

'Oh, Vincent!' she said reproachfully, 'you used to be so ambitious. Don't you remember how we settled once that you were going to be famous? You can't be very famous by coffee-planting, can you?'

'If I do that, it is only because I see nothing else to do. But I am ambitious still, Mabel. I shall not be content with that, if a certain venture of mine is

successful enough to give me hopes of anything better. But it's a very big "if" at present.'

'What is the venture?' said Mabel. 'Tell me, Vincent; you used to tell me everything once.'

Vincent had very few traces of his tropical extraction in his nature, and his caution and reserve would have made him disposed to wait at least until his book were safe in the haven of printer's ink before confessing that he was an author.

But Mabel's appeal scattered all his prudence. He had written with Mabel as his public; with the chief hope in his mind that some day she would see his work and say that it was well done. He felt a strong impulse to confide in her now, and have the comfort of her sympathy and encouragement to carry away with him.

If he had been able to tell her then of his book, and his plans respecting it, Mabel might have looked upon him with a new interest, and much that followed in her life might have been prevented. But he hesitated for a moment, and while he hesitated a second interruption took place. The opportunity was gone, and, like most opportunities in conversation, once missed was gone for ever. The irrepressible Dolly was the innocent instrument: she came in with a big portfolio of black and white papers, which she put down on a chair. 'I can't find the metronome anywhere, Fräulein,' she said. 'I've been talking to Colin: he wants you to come and say good-bye before you go, Vincent. Colin says he nearly got "swished" to-day, only his master begged him off because he'd done nothing at all really. Wasn't it nice of him? Ask him to tell you about it. Oh, and, Vincent, I want your head for my album. May I cut it out?'

'I want it myself, Dolly, please,' said Vincent; 'I don't think I can do without it just yet.'

'I don't mean your real head,' said Dolly, 'I believe you know that—it's only the outline I want!'

'It isn't a very dreadful operation, Vincent,' said Mabel. 'Dolly has been victimising all her friends lately, but she doesn't hurt them.'

'Very well, Dolly, I consent,' said Vincent; 'only be gentle with me.'

'Sit down here on this chair against the wall,' said Dolly imperiously. 'Mabel, please take the shade off the lamp and put it over here.' She armed herself with a pencil and a large sheet of white paper as she spoke. 'Now, Vincent, put yourself so that your shadow comes just here, and keep perfectly still. Don't move, or talk, or anything, or your profile will be spoilt!'

'I feel very nervous, Dolly,' said Vincent, sitting down obediently.

'What a coward you must be! Why, one of the boys at Colin's school said he rather liked it. Will you hold his head steady, Mabel, please?—no, you hold the paper up while I trace.'

Vincent sat still while Mabel leaned over the back of his chair, with one hand lightly touching his shoulder, while her soft hair swept across his cheek now and then. Long after—as long as he lived, in fact—he remembered those moments with a thrill.

"Now I have done, Vincent,' cried Dolly, triumphantly, after some laborious tracing on the paper. 'You haven't got *much* of a profile, but it will be exactly like you when I've cut it out. There!' she said, as she held up a life-size head cut out in curling black paper; 'don't you think it's like you, yourself?'

'I don't know,' said Vincent, inspecting it rather dubiously, 'but I must say I hope it isn't.'

'I'll give you a copy to take away with you,' said Dolly, generously, as she cut out another black head with her deft little hands. "There, that's for you, Vincent—you won't give it away, *will* you?"

'Shall I promise to wear it always next to my heart, Dolly?'

Dolly considered this question. "I think you'd better not,' she said at last: 'it would keep you warm certainly, but I'm afraid the black comes off—you must have it mounted on cardboard and framed, you know.'

At this point Mrs. Langton came rustling down, and Vincent rose to meet her, with a desperate hope that he would be asked to spend the whole of his last evening with them—a hope that was doomed to disappointment.

'My dear Vincent,' she said, holding out both her hands, 'so you've come after all. Really, I was quite afraid you'd forgotten us. Why didn't somebody tell me Vincent was here, Mabel? I would have hurried over my dressing to come down. It's so provoking, Vincent, but I have to say good-bye in a hurry. My husband and I are going out to dinner, and he wouldn't come home to change, so he will dress at his

chambers, and I have to go up and fetch him. And it's so late, and they dine so ridiculously early where we're going, and he's sure to keep me waiting such a time, I mustn't lose another minute. Will you see me to the carriage, Vincent? Thanks. Has Marshall put the footwarmer in, and is the drugget down? Then we'll go, please; and I wish you every success in—over there, you know, and you must be careful of yourself and bring home a nice wife.—Lincoln's Inn, tell him, please.—Good-bye, Vincent, good-bye!'

And she smiled affectionately and waved her long-gloved hand behind the window as the carriage rolled off, and all the time he knew that it would not distress her if she never saw him again.

He went slowly back to the warm drawing-room, with its delicate perfume of violets. He had no excuse for lingering there any longer—he must say his last words to Mabel and go. But before he could make up his mind to this another visitor was announced, who must have come up almost as Mrs. Langton had driven off.

'Mr. Caffyn,' said Champion, imposingly, who had a graceful way of handing dishes and a dignified deference in his bow which in his own opinion excused certain attacks of solemn speechlessness and eccentricity of gait that occasionally overcame him.

A tall, graceful young man came in, with an air of calm and ease that was in the slightest degree exaggerated. He had short light hair, well-shaped eyes, which were keen and rather cold, and a firm, thin-lipped mouth; his voice, which he had under perfect control, was clear and pleasant.

'Do you mean this for an afternoon call, Harold?' asked Mabel, who did not seem altogether pleased at his arrival.

'Yes, we're not at home now, are we, Mabel?' put in audacious Dolly.

'I was kept rather late at rehearsal, and I had to dine afterwards,' explained Caffyn; 'but I shouldn't have come in if I had not had a commission to perform. When I have done it you can send me away.'

Harold Caffyn was a relation of Mrs. Langton's. His father was high up in the consular service abroad, and he himself had lately gone on the stage, finding it more attractive than the Foreign Office, for which he had been originally intended. He had had no reason as yet to regret his apostasy, for he had obtained almost at once an engagement in a leading West-end theatre, while his social prospects had not been materially affected by the change; partly because the world has become more liberal of late in these matters, and partly because he had contrived to gain a tolerably secure position in it already, by the help of a pleasant manner and the musical and dramatic accomplishments which had led him to adopt the stage as his profession.

Like Holroyd, he had known Mabel from a child, and as she grew up had felt her attraction too much for his peace of mind. His one misgiving in going on the stage had been lest it should lessen his chance of finding favour with her.

This fear proved groundless: Mabel had not altered to him in the least. But his successes as an amateur had not followed him to the public stage; he had not as yet been entrusted with any but very minor *rôles*, and was already disenchanted enough with his profession to be willing to give it up on very moderate provocation.

'Why, Holroyd, I didn't see you over there. How are you?' he said cordially, though his secret feelings were anything but cordial, for he had long seen reason to consider Vincent as a possible rival.

'Vincent has come to say good-bye,' explained Dolly. 'He's going to India to-morrow.'

'Good-bye!' said Caffyn, his face clearing: 'that's rather sudden, isn't it, Holroyd? Well, I'm very glad I am able to say good-bye too' (as there is no doubt Caffyn was). 'You never told me you were off so soon.'

Holroyd had known Caffyn for several years: they had frequently met in that house, and, though there was little in common between them, their relations had always been friendly.

'It was rather sudden,' Holroyd said, 'and we haven't met lately.'

'And you're off to-morrow, eh? I'm sorry. We might have managed a parting dinner before you went—it must be kept till you come back.'

'What was the commission, Harold?' asked Mabel.

'Oh, ah! I met my uncle to-day, and he told me to find out if you would be able to run down to Chigbourne one Saturday till Monday soon. I suppose you won't. He's a dear old boy, but he's rather a dull old pump to stay two whole days with.'

'You forget he's Dolly's godfather,' said Mabel.

'And he's my uncle,' said Caffyn; 'but he's not a bit the livelier for that, you know. You're asked too, Juggins.' (Juggins was a name he had for Dolly, whom he found pleasure in teasing, and who was not deeply attached to him.)

'Would you like to go, Dolly, if mother says yes?' asked Mabel.

'Is Harold going?' said Dolly.

'Harold does not happen to be asked, my Juggins,' said that gentleman blandly.

'Then we'll go, Mabel, and I shall take Frisk, because Uncle Anthony hasn't seen him for a long time.'

Holroyd saw no use in staying longer. He went into the school-room to see Colin, who was as sorry to say good-bye as the pile of school-books in front of him allowed, and then he returned to take leave of the others. The governess read in his face that her well-meant services had been of no avail, and sighed compassionately as she shook hands. Dolly nestled against him and cried a little, and the cool Harold felt so strongly that he could afford to be generous now, that he was genial and almost affectionate in his good wishes.

His face clouded, however, when Mabel said 'Don't ring, Ottilia. I will go to the door with Vincent—it's the last time.'

'I wonder if she cares about the fellow!' he thought uneasily.

'You won't forget to write to us as soon as you can, Vincent?' said Mabel, as they stood in the hall together. 'We shall be thinking of you so often, and wondering what you are doing, and how you are.'

The hall of a London house is perhaps hardly the place for love-passages—there is something fatally ludicrous about a declaration among the hats and umbrellas. In spite of a consciousness of this, however, Vincent felt a passionate impulse even then, at that eleventh hour, to tell Mabel something of what was in his heart.

But he kept silence: a surer instinct warned him that he had delayed too long to have any chance of success then. It was the fact that Mabel had no suspicion of the real nature of his feelings, and he was right in concluding as he did that to avow it then would come upon her as a shock for which she was unprepared.

Fräulein Mozer's inclination to a sentimental view of life, and Caffyn's tendency to see a rival in every one, had quickened their insight respectively; but Mabel herself, though girls are seldom the last to discover such symptoms, had never thought of Vincent as a possible lover, for which his own undemonstrative manner and procrastination were chiefly to blame.

He had shrunk from betraying his feelings before. 'She can never care for me,' he had thought; 'I have done nothing to deserve her—I am nobody,' and this had urged him on to do something which might qualify him in his own eyes, until which he had steadily kept his own counsel and seen her as seldom as possible.

Then he had written his book; and though he was not such a fool as to imagine that any woman's heart could be approached through print alone, he could not help feeling on revising his work that he had done that which, if successful, would remove something of his own unworthiness, and might give him a new recommendation to a girl of Mabel's literary sympathy.

But then his father's summons to Ceylon had come—he was compelled to obey, and now he had to tear himself away with his secret still untold, and trust to time and absence (who are remarkably overrated as advocates, by the way) to plead for him.

He felt the full bitterness of this as he held both her hands and looked down on her fair face and the sweet eyes that shone with a sister's—but only a sister's—affection. 'She would have loved me in time,' he thought; 'but the time may never come now.'

He did not trust himself to say much: he might have asked and obtained a kiss, as an almost brother who was going far away, but to him that would have been the hollowest mockery.

Suppressed emotion made him abrupt and almost cold, he let her hands drop suddenly, and with nothing more than a broken 'God bless you, Mabel, good-bye, dear, good-bye!' he left the house hurriedly, and the moment after he was alone on the hill with his heartache.

'So he's gone!' remarked Caffyn, as she re-entered the drawing-room after lingering a few moments in the empty hall. 'What a dear, dull old plodder it is, isn't it? He'll do much better at planting coffee than he ever did at law—at least, it's to be hoped so!"

'You are very fond of calling other people dull, Harold,' said Mabel, with

a displeased contraction of her eyebrows. 'Vincent is not in the least dull: you only speak of him like that because you don't understand him.'

'I didn't say it disparagingly,' said Caffyn. 'I rather admire dulness; it's so restful. But as you say, Mabel, I dare say I don't understand him: he really doesn't give a fellow a fair chance. As far as I know him, I *do* like him uncommonly; but, at the same time, I must confess he has always given me the impression of being, don't you know, just a trifle heavy. But very likely I'm wrong.'

'Very likely indeed,' said Mabel, closing the subject. But Caffyn had not spoken undesignedly, and had risked offending her for the moment for the sake of producing the effect he wanted; and he was not altogether unsuccessful. 'Was Harold right?' she thought later. 'Vincent is very quiet, but I always thought there was power of some sort behind; and yet—would it not have shown itself before now? But if poor Vincent *is* only dull, it will make no difference to me; I shall like him just as much.'

But for all that, the suggestion very effectually prevented all danger of Vincent's becoming idealised by distance into something more interesting than a brother—which was, indeed, the reason why Caffyn made it.

Vincent himself, meanwhile, unaware—as all of us would pray to be kept unaware—of the portrait of himself, by a friend, which was being exhibited to the girl he loved, was walking down Ladbroke Hill to spend the remainder of his last evening in England in loneliness at his rooms; for he had no heart for anything else.

It was dark by that time. Above him was a clear, steel-blue sky; in front, across the hollow, rose Campden Hill, a dim, dark mass, twinkling with lights. By the square at his side a German band was playing the garden music from 'Faust,' with no more regard for expression and tunefulness than a German band is ever capable of; but distance softened the harshness and imperfection of their rendering, and Siebel's air seemed to Vincent the expression of his own passionate, unrequited devotion.

'I would do anything for her,' he said, half aloud, 'and yet I dared not tell her then. . . . But if I ever come back to her again—before it is too late—she shall know all she is and always will be to me. I will wait and hope for that.'

CHAPTER IV.

MALAKOFF TERRACE.

After parting from Vincent at the end of Rotten Row, Mark Ashburn continued his walk alone through Kensington High Street and onwards, until he came to one of those quiet streets which serve as a sort of backwater to the main stream of traffic, and, turning down this, it was not long before he reached a row of small three-story houses, with their lower parts cased in stucco, but the rest allowed to remain in the original yellow-brown brick, which time had mellowed to a pleasant warm tone.

'Malakoff Terrace,' as the place had been christened (and the title was a tolerable index of its date), was rather less depressing in appearance than many of its more modern neighbours, with their dismal monotony and pretentiousness. It faced a well-kept enclosure, with trim lawns and beds, and across the compact laurel hedges in the little front gardens a curious passer-by might catch glimpses of various interiors which in nearly every case left him with an impression of cosy comfort. The outline of the terrace was broken here and there by little verandahs protecting the shallow balconies and painted a deep Indian-red or sap-green, which in summer-time were gay with flowers and creepers, and one seldom passed there then on warm and drowsy afternoons without undergoing a well-sustained fire from quite a masked battery of pianos, served from behind the fluttering white curtains at most of the long open windows on the first floor.

Even in winter and at night the terrace was cheerful, with its variety of striped and coloured blinds and curtains at the illuminated windows; and where blinds and curtains were undrawn and the little front rooms left unlighted, the firelight flickering within on shining bookcases and picture frames was no less pleasantly suggestive. Still, in every neighbourhood there will always be some houses whose exteriors are severely unattractive; without being poverty-stricken, they seem to belong to people indifferent to all but the absolutely essential, and incapable of surrounding themselves with any of the characteristic contrivances that most homes which are more than mere lodgings amass almost unconsciously. It was before a house of this latter kind that Mark stopped—a

house with nothing in the shape of a verandah to relieve its formality. Behind its front railings there were no trim laurel bushes—only an uncomfortable bed of equal parts of mould and broken red tiles, in which a withered juniper was dying hard; at the windows were no bright curtain-folds or hanging baskets of trailing fern to give a touch of colour, but dusty wire blinds and hangings of a faded drab.

It was not a boarding-house, but the home in which Mark Ashburn lived with his family, who, if they were not precisely gay, were as respectable as any in the terrace, which is better in some respects than mere gaiety.

He found them all sitting down to dinner in the back parlour, a square little room with a grey paper of a large and hideous design. His mother, a stout lady with a frosty complexion, a cold grey eye, and an injured expression about the mouth and brow, was serving out soup with a touch of the relieving officer in her manner; opposite to her was her husband, a mild little man in habitually low spirits; and the rest of the family, Mark's two sisters, Martha and Trixie, and his younger brother, Cuthbert, were in their respective places.

Mrs. Ashburn looked up severely as he came in. 'You are late again, Mark,' she said; 'while you are under this roof' (Mrs. Ashburn was fond of referring to the roof) 'your father and I expect you to conform to the rules of the house.'

'Well, you see, mother,' explained Mark, sitting down and unfolding his napkin, 'it was a fine afternoon, so I thought I would walk home with a friend.'

'There is a time for walking home with a friend, and a time for dinner,' observed his mother, with the air of quoting something Scriptural.

'And I've mixed them, mother? So I have; I'm sorry, and I won't do it again. There, will that do?'

'Make haste and eat your soup, Mark, and don't keep us all waiting for you.'

Mrs. Ashburn had never quite realised that her family had grown up. She still talked to Mark as she had done when he was a careless schoolboy at St. Peter's; she still tried to enforce little moral lessons and even petty restrictions upon her family generally; and though she had been long reduced to blank cartridges, it worried them.

The ideal family circle, on re-assembling at the close of the day, celebrate their reunion with an increasing flow of lively conversation; those who have been out into the great world describe their personal experiences, and the scenes, tragic or humorous, which they have severally witnessed during the day; and when these are exhausted, the female members take up the tale and relate the humbler incidents of domestic life, and so the hours pass till bedtime.

Such circles are in all sincerity to be congratulated; but it is to be feared that in the majority of cases the conversation of a family whose members meet every day is apt, among themselves, to become frightfully monosyllabic. It was certainly so with the Ashburns. Mark and Trixie sometimes felt the silence too oppressive to be borne, and made desperate attempts at establishing a general discussion on something or anything; but it was difficult to select a topic that could not be brought down by an axiom from Mrs. Ashburn, which disposed of the whole subject in very early infancy. Cuthbert generally came back from the office tired and somewhat sulky; Martha's temper was not to be depended upon of an evening; and Mr. Ashburn himself rarely contributed more than a heavy sigh to the common stock of conversation.

Under these circumstances it will be readily believed that Mark's 'Evenings at Home' were by no means brilliant. He sometimes wondered himself why he had borne them so long; and if he had been able to procure comfortable lodgings at as cheap a rate as it cost him to live at home, he would probably have taken an early opportunity of bursting the bonds of family dulness. But his salary was not large, his habits were expensive, and he stayed on.

The beginning of this particular evening did not promise any marked increase in the general liveliness. Mrs. Ashburn announced lugubriously to all whom it might concern that she had eaten no lunch; Martha mentioned that a Miss Hornblower had called that afternoon—which produced no sensation, though Cuthbert seemed for a moment inclined to ask who Miss Hornblower might happen to be, till he remembered in time that he really did not care, and saved himself the trouble. Then Trixie made a well-meant, but rather too obvious, effort to allure him to talk by an inquiry (which had become something of a formula) whether he had 'seen any one' that day, to which Cuthbert replied that he had noticed one or two people hanging about the City; and

Martha observed that she was glad to see he still kept up his jokes, moving him to confess sardonically that he knew he was a funny dog, but when he saw them all—and particularly Martha—rollicking round him, he could not help bubbling over with merriment himself.

Mrs. Ashburn caught the reply, and said severely: 'I do *not* think, Cuthbert, that either I or your father have ever set you the example of "rollicking," as you call it, at this table. Decent mirth and a cheerful tone of conversation we have always encouraged. I don't know why you should receive a mother's remarks with laughter. It is not respectful of you, Cuthbert, I must say!'

Mrs. Ashburn would probably have proceeded to further defend herself and family from the charge of rollicking, and to draw uncomplimentary parallels from the Proverbs between the laughter of certain persons and the crackling of thorns under a pot, when a timely diversion was effected by a sounding knock at the little front door. The maid put down the dish she was handing and vanished; after which there were sounds of a large body entering the passage, and a loud voice exclaiming, 'All in, hey? and at dinner, are they? Very well, my dear; tell 'em I'm here. I know my way in.'

'It's Uncle Solomon!' went round the table. They refrained from any outward expression of joy, because they were naturally a quiet family.

'Well,' said Mrs. Ashburn, who seemed to put her own construction on this reserve, 'and I'm sure if there is any table at which my only brother Solomon should be a welcome quest, it's *this* table.'

'Quite so, my dear; quite so,' said Mr. Ashburn, hastily. 'He was here last week; but we're all glad to see him at any time, I'm sure.'

'I hope so, indeed! Go in, Trixie, and help your uncle off with his coat,' for there were snorting and puffing signs from the next room, as if their relative were in difficulties; but before Trixie could rise the voice was heard again, 'That's it, Ann, thanky—you're called Ann, aren't you? I thought so. Ah, how's the baker, Ann—wasn't it the baker I caught down the airy, now? *wasn't* it, hey?'

And then a large red-faced person came in, with a puffy, important mouth, a fringe of whiskers meeting under his chin, and what Trixie, in speaking privately of her relative's personal appearance, described as 'little piggy eyes,' which had, however, a twinkle of a rather primitive kind of humour in them.

Solomon Lightowler was a brother of Mrs. Ashburn's, a retired business man, who had amassed a considerable fortune in the hardware trade.

He was a widower and without children, and it was he who, fired with the ambition of placing a nephew in the Indian Civil Service as a rising monument to his uncle's perception, had sent Mark to the crammer's—for Mr. Ashburn's position in the Inland Revenue Office would scarcely have warranted such an outlay.

Mark's performances at his first examination, as has been said, had not been calculated to encourage his uncle's hopes, but the latter had been slightly mollified by his nephew's spirit in carrying off the Cambridge scholarship soon afterwards, and with the idea of having one more attempt to 'see his money back,' Mr. Lightowler had consented to keep him for the necessary time at the University. When that experiment also had ended in disaster, Uncle Solomon seemed at one time to have given him up in disgust, only reserving himself, as the sole value for his money, the liberty of reproach, and Mark was of opinion that he had already gone far towards recouping himself in this respect alone.

'Hah! phew—you're very hot in here!' he remarked, as an agreeable opening—he felt himself rich enough to be able to remark on other people's atmospheres; but Cuthbert expressed a *sotto voce* wish that his uncle were exposed to an even higher temperature.

'We can't all live in country houses, Solomon,' said his sister, 'and a small room soon gets warm to any one coming in from the cold air.'

'Warm!' said Mr. Lightowler, with a snort; 'I should think you must all of you be fired like a set of pots! I don't care where I sit, so long as I'm well away from the fire. I'll come by you, Trixie, eh—you'll take care of your uncle, won't you?'

Trixie was a handsome girl of about eighteen, with abundant auburn hair, which was never quite in good order, and pretty hands of which most girls would have been more careful; she had developed a limp taste for art of late, finding drawing outlines at an art school less irksome than assisting in the housekeeping at home. Uncle Solomon always alarmed her because she never knew

what he would say next; but as it was a family rule to be civil to him, she made room for him with great apparent alacrity.

'And how are you all, boys and girls, eh?' asked Uncle Solomon, when he was comfortably seated; 'Mark, you've got fuller in the waist of late; you don't take 'alf enough exercise. Cuthbert, lad, you're looking very sallow under the eyes—smoking and late hours, *that's* the way with all the young men nowadays! Why don't you talk to him, eh, Matthew? I should if he was a boy o' mine. Well, Martha, has any nice young man asked you to name a day yet?—he's a long time coming forward, Martha, that nice young man; why, let me see, Jane, she must be getting on now for—she was born in the year fifty-four, was it?—four it was; it was in the war time, I remember, and you wanted her christened Alma, but I said an uncommon name is all very well if she grows up good-looking, but if she's plain it only sounds ridiklous; so, very fortunately as things turn out, you had her christened Martha. There's nothing to bite your lips over, my dear; no one blames you for it, we can't all be born 'andsome. It's Trixie here who gets all the love-letters, isn't it, Trixie?—ah, I *thought* I should see a blush if I looked! Who is it now, Trixie, and where do we meet him, and when is the wedding? Come, tell your old uncle.'

'Don't put such nonsense into the child's head, Solomon,' said his sister, in a slightly scandalised tone.

'That would be coals to Newcastle with a vengeance,' he chuckled; 'but you mustn't mind my going on—that's my way; if people don't like it I can't help it, but I always speak right out.'

'Which is the reason we love him,' came in a stage aside from Cuthbert, who took advantage of a slight deafness in one of his uncle's ears.

'Well, Mr. Schoolmaster,' said the latter, working round to Mark again, 'and how are *you* gettin' on? If you'd worked harder at College and done me credit, you'd 'a' been a feller of your college, or a judge in an Indian court, by this time, instead of birching naughty little boys.'

'It's a detail,' said Mark; 'but I don't interfere in that department.'

'Well, you *are* young to be trusted with a birch. I'm glad they look at things that way. If *you're* satisfied with yourself, I suppose I ought to be, though I did look forward once to seeing a nephew of mine famous. You've *'ad* all your fame at Cambridge, with your papers, and your poems, and your College skits—a nice snug little fame all to yourself.'

Martha tittered acidly at this light badinage, but it brought a pained look into Trixie's large brown eyes, who thought it was a shame that poor Mark should never be allowed to hear the last of his Cambridge *fiasco*.

Even Mrs. Ashburn seemed anxious to shield Mark. 'Ah, Solomon,' she said, 'Mark sees his folly now; he knows how wrong he was to spend his time in idle scribbling to amuse thoughtless young men, when he ought to have studied hard and shown his gratitude to you for all you have done for him.'

'Well, I've been a good friend to him, Jane, and I could have been a better if he'd proved deserving. I'm not one to grudge any expense. And if I thought, even now, that he'd really given up his scribbling——'

Mark thought it prudent to equivocate: 'Even if I wished to write, uncle,' he said, 'what with my schoolwork, and what with reading for the Bar, I should not have much time for it; but mother is right, I *do* see my folly now.'

This pleased Uncle Solomon, who still clung to the fragments of his belief in Mark's ability, and had been gratified upon his joining one of the Inns of Court by the prospect of having a nephew who at least would have the title of barrister; he relaxed at once: 'Well, well, let bygones be bygones, you may be a credit to me yet. And now I think of it, come down and stay Sunday at "The Woodbines" soon, will you? it'll be a rest for you, and I want you to see some of that 'Umpage's goings on at the church.' (Uncle Solomon not unfrequently dropped an 'h,' but with a deliberation that seemed to say that he was quite aware it was there, but did not consider it advisable to recognise it just then.) 'He's quite got round the Vicar; made him have flowers and a great brass cross and candles on the Communion table, and 'Umpage all the time a feller with no more religion inside him than'—here he looked round the table for a comparison—'ah, than that jug has! He's talked the Vicar into getting them little bags for collections now, all because he was jealous at the clerk's putting the plate inside my pew reg'lar for *me* to hold. It isn't that I care about holding a plate, but to see 'Umpage smirking round with one of

them red velvet bags makes me downright sick—they'll drive me to go over and be a Baptist one of these fine days.'

'You don't like Mr. Humpage, do you, uncle?' said Trixie.

''Umpage and me are not friendly—though contiguous,' said he; 'but as for liking, I neither like nor dislike the man; we 'ave no intercourse, beyond looking the other way in church and having words across the fence when his fowls break through into my garden—he won't have the hole seen to, so I shall get it done myself and send the bill in to him—that's what *I* shall do.—A letter for you, Matthew? read away, don't mind me,' for the maid had come in meanwhile with a letter, which Matthew Ashburn opened and began to read at this permission.

Presently he rubbed his forehead perplexedly: 'I can't make head or tail of it,' he said feebly; 'I don't know who they are, or what they write all this to *me* for!'

''And it over to me, Matthew; let's see if *I* can make it any plainer for you,' said his brother-in-law, persuaded that to his powerful mind few things could long remain a mystery.

He took the letter, solemnly settled his double eyeglasses well down on his broad nose, coughed importantly, and began to read: 'Dear Sir,' he began in a tone of expounding wisdom—'well, that's straightforward enough—Dear Sir, we have given our best consideration to the—hey!' (here his face began to grow less confident) 'the sweet—what?—ah, sweet bells, sweet bells jangled. What have you been jangling *your* bells about, eh, Matthew?'

'I think they're mad,' said poor Mr. Ashburn; 'the bells in this house are all right, I think, my dear?'

'I'm not aware that any of them are out of order; they rehung the bell in the area the other day—it's some mistake,' said Mrs. Ashburn.

'Which,' continued Uncle Solomon, 'you 'ave been good enough to submit to us (pretty good that for a bell-hanger, hey?). We regret, however, to say that we do not find ourselves in a position to make any overtures to you in the matter. Well,' he said, though not very confidently, 'you've been writing to your landlord about the fixtures, and these are his lawyers writing back—isn't *that* it now?'

'What should I write to *him* for?' said Mr. Ashburn; 'that's not it, Solomon—go on, it gets worse by-and-by!'

'Your one fair daughter also (hullo, Trixie!) we find ourselves compelled to decline, although with more reluctance; but, in spite of some considerable merits, there is a slight roughness (why, her complexion's clear enough!), together with a certain immaturity and total lack of form and motive (you *are* giddy, you know, Trixie, I always told you so), which are in our opinion sufficient to prevent us from making any proposals to you in the matter.'

Uncle Solomon laid down the letter at this point, and looked around open-mouthed. 'I thought I could make out most things,' he said; 'but this is rather beyond me, I must say.'

'Here are these people—what's their names? Leadbitter and Gandy (who I take it are in the gas-fitting and decorating line—writing to say in the same breath that they can't come and see to your bells, and they don't want to marry your daughter. Who asked them?—you ain't come down so low in the world to go and offer Trixie to a gasfitter, I should hope, Matthew!—and yet what else *does* it mean—tell me that, and I'll thank you.'

'Don't ask *me*,' said the unhappy father; 'they're perfect strangers.'

'Trixie, you know nothing about it, I hope?' said Mrs. Ashburn, rather suspiciously.

'No, ma dear,' said Trixie; 'but I don't want to marry either Mr. Leadbitter or Mr. Gandy.'

The situation had become too much for Mark; at first he had hoped that by holding his tongue he might escape being detected, while the rejection of both the novels from which he had hoped so much was a heavy blow which he felt he could scarcely bear in public; but they seemed so determined to sift the matter to the end that he decided to enlighten them at once, since it must be only a question of time.

But his voice was choked and his face crimson as he said, 'I think perhaps I can explain it.'

'You!' they all cried, while Uncle Solomon added something about 'young men having grown cleverer since his young days.'

'Yes, that letter is addressed to me—M. Ashburn, you see, stands for Mark, not Matthew. It's from—from a firm of publishers,' said the unlucky Mark, speaking very hoarsely; 'I sent them two novels of mine—one was called "One Fair Daughter," and the other "Sweet

Bells Jangled"—and they, they won't take them—that's all.'

There was a 'sensation,' as reporters say, at this announcement: Martha gave a sour little laugh of disgust; Cuthbert looked as if he thought a good deal which brotherly feeling forbade him to put in words; but Trixie tried to take Mark's hand under the table—he shrank from all sympathy, however, at such a moment, and shook her off impatiently, and all she could do was to keep her eyes in pity from his face.

Mrs. Ashburn gave a tragic groan and shook her head: to her a young man who was capable of writing novels was lost; she had a wholesome horror of all fiction, having come from a race of Dissenters of the strict old-fashioned class, whose prejudices her hard dull nature had retained in all their strength. Her husband, without any very clear views of his own, thought as she did as soon as he knew her opinions, and they all left it to Mr. Lightowler to interpret the 'evident sense of the house.'

He expanded himself imposingly, calling up his bitterest powers of satire to do justice to the occasion: 'So *that's* all, is it?' he said; 'ah, and quite enough, too, *I* should think; so it was the bells on *your* cap that were jingling all the time?'

'Since you put it in that pleasant way,' said Mark, 'I suppose it was.'

'And that's how you've been studying for the Bar of evenings, this is the way you've overcome your fondness for scribbling nonsense? I've spent all the money I've laid out on you' (it was a way of his to talk as if Mark had been a building estate), 'I've given you a good education, all to have you writing novels and get 'em "returned with thanks!"—you might have done that much without going to College!'

'Every writer of any note has had novels declined at some time,' said Mark.

'Well,' said Uncle Solomon, ponderously, 'if that's all, you've made a capital start. You can set up as a big littery pot at once, *you* can, with a brace of 'em. I hope you're satisfied with all this, Jane, I'm sure?'

'It's no use saying anything,' she said; 'but it's a bad return after all your kindness to him.'

'A return with thanks,' put in Cuthbert, who was not without some enjoyment of Mark's discomfiture; he had long had a certain contempt for his elder brother as a much overrated man, and he felt, with perfect justice, that had Fortune made him his uncle's favourite, he had brains which would have enabled him to succeed where Mark had failed; but he had been obliged to leave school early for a City office, which had gone some way towards souring him.

'There's an old Latin proverb,' said Mr. Ashburn, with a feeling that it was his turn—'an old Latin proverb, "*Nec suetonius ultra crepitam.*"'

'No, excuse me, you 'aven't *quite* got it, Matthew,' said his brother-in-law, patronisingly; 'you're very near it, though. It runs, if I don't make a mistake, "ne plus ultra sutorius (not *suetonius—he* was a Roman emperor)—crepitam," a favourite remark of the poet Cicero—"Cobbler stick to your last," as *we* have it more neatly. But your father's right on the main point, Mark. I don't say you need stick to the schoolmastering, unless you choose. I'll see you started at the Bar; I came this very evening to have a talk with you on that. But what do you want to go and lower yourself by literature for? There's a littery man down at our place, a poor feller that writes for the "Chigbourne and Lamford Gazette," and gets my gardener to let him take the measure of my gooseberries; he's got a hat on him my scarecrow wouldn't be seen in. That's what you'll come to.'

'There's some difference,' said Mark, getting roused, 'between the reporter of a country paper and a novelist.'

'There's a difference between you and him,' retorted his uncle; 'he gets what he writes put in and paid so much a line for—*you* don't. That's all the difference *I* can see.'

'But when the books are accepted, they will be paid for,' said Mark, 'and well paid for too.'

'I always thought that dog and the shadow must ha' been a puppy, and now I know it,' said his uncle, irritably. 'Now look here, Mark, let's have no more nonsense about it. I said I came here to have a little talk with you, and though things are not what I expected, 'ave it I will. When I saw you last, I thought you were trying to raise yourself by your own efforts and studying law, and I said to myself, "I'll give him another chance." It seems now that was all talk; but I'll give you the chance for all that. If you like to take it, well and good; if not, I've done with you this time once for all. You go on and work 'ard at this Law till you've served your time out, or kept your terms, or whatever they call it, and when you get called

you can give 'em notice to quit at your school. *I'll* pay your fees and see you started in chambers till you're able to run alone. Only, and mind this, no more of your scribbling—drop that littery rubbish once for all, and I stand by you; go on at it, and I leave you to go to the dogs your own way. That's my offer, and I mean it.'

There are few things so unpleasantly corrective to one's self-esteem as a letter of rejection such as had come to Mark—the refusal of the school committee was insignificant in comparison; only those who have yielded to the subtle temptation to submit manuscript to an editor or a publisher's reader, and have seen it return in dishonour, can quite realise the dull anguish of it, the wild, impotent rebellion that follows, and the stunned sense that all one's ideas will have somehow to be readjusted; perhaps an artist whose pictures are not hung feels something of it, but there one's wounded vanity can more easily find salves.

Mark felt the blow very keenly; for weeks he had been building hopes on these unfortunate manuscripts of his; he had sent both to a firm under whose auspices he was particularly anxious to come before the world, in the hope that one at least would find favour with them, and now the two had been unequivocally declined; for a moment his confidence in himself was shaken, and he almost accepted the verdict.

And yet he hesitated still: the publisher might be wrong; he had heard of books riding out several such storms and sailing in triumphantly at last. There was Carlyle, there was Charlotte Brontë, and other instances occurred to him. And he longed for speedy fame, and the law was a long avenue to it.

'You hear what your uncle says?' said his mother. 'Surely you won't refuse a chance like this.'

'Yes, he will,' said Martha. 'Mark would rather write novels than work, wouldn't you, Mark? It must be so amusing to write things which will never be read, I'm sure.'

'Leave Mark alone, Martha,' said Trixie. 'It's a shame—it is.'

'I don't know why you should all be down on me like this,' said Mark; 'there's nothing positively immoral in writing books—at least when it never goes any further. But I dare say you're right, and I believe *you* mean to be kind at any rate, uncle. I'll take your offer. I'll read steadily, and get called, and see if I'm good for anything at the Bar, since it seems I'm good for nothing else.'

'And you'll give up the writing, hey?' said his uncle.

'Oh, yes,' said Mark, irritably, 'anything you please. I'm a reformed character; I'll take the pledge to abstain from ink in all forms if you like.' It was not a very gracious way of accepting what was by no means an unhandsome offer; but he was jarred and worried, and scarcely knew what he said.

Mr. Lightowler was not sensitive, and was too satisfied at having gained his object to cavil at Mark's manner of yielding. 'Very well; that's settled,' he said. 'I'm glad you've come to your senses, I'm sure. We'll have you on the Woolsack yet, and we'll say no more about the other business.'

'And now,' said Mark, with a forced smile, 'I think I'll say good-night. I'll go and attack the law-books while I'm in the humour for them.'.

Upstairs in his room he got out his few elementary text-books, and began to read with a sort of sullen determination; but he had not gone very far in the 'descent of an estate-tail' before he shut the book up in a passion.

'I can't read to-night,' he said savagely; 'it isn't easy to hug my chains all at once; it will be a long time before I come out strong on estates-tail. If Holroyd (who says he *likes* the jargon) can't get a living by it, there's not much hope for me. I loathe it! I'm sure I had a chance with those books of mine, too; but that's all over. I must burn them, I suppose—— Who's there?' for there was a tap at the door.

'It's me, Mark—Trixie—let me in.' Mark rose and opened the door to Trixie, in a loose morning wrapper. 'Mark, I'm so sorry, dear,' she said softly.

'Sorry! You ought to rejoice, Trixie,' said Mark, with a bitter laugh. 'I'm a brand from the burning—a repentant novelist, I've seen my errors and am going to turn Lord Chancellor.'

'You mustn't be angry with them,' said Trixie. 'Dear ma is very strict; but then she is so anxious to see you making a living, Mark, and you know they don't give you very much at St. Peter's. And Martha and Cuthbert can't help saying disagreeable things. Don't you think, perhaps,' she added timidly, 'that's it's better for you to give up thinking about writing any more?'

'Well, I've done it, Trixie, at any rate. I'm not so bad as that fellow Delobelle, in "Fromont Jeune," with

his "Je n'ai pas le droit de renoncer au théâtre!" am I? I've renounced *my* stage. I'm a good little boy, and won't make a mess with nasty ink and pens any more. When I get those confounded books back they shall go into the fire—by Jove they shall!'

'No, Mark, don't, it would be such a pity,' cried Trixie. 'I'm sure they were beautifully written; quite as well as some that get printed. I wish you could write novels and be Lord Chancellor too, Mark.'

'Bring out Acts in three volumes, and edit Judicature Rules in fancy covers for railway reading? It would be very nice, Trixie, wouldn't it? But I'm afraid it wouldn't do, even if I wrote them in secret, under the Woolsack. If I write anything now, it must be a smart spicy quarto on Bankruptcy, or a rattling digest on the Law of Settlement and Highways. My fictions will be all legal ones.'

'I know you will do your best,' said Trixie, simply.

Mark dreamed that night—much as other disappointed literary aspirants have dreamed before him—that a second letter had come from the publishers, stating that they had reconsidered their decision, and offering repentantly to publish both novels on fabulous terms. He was just rushing to call Trixie, and tell her the good news, when the dream faded, and he awoke to the consciousness of his very different circumstances.

Literature had jilted him. The Law was to be his mistress henceforth: a bony and parchment-faced *inamorata*, with a horsehair wig; and he thought of the task of wooing her with a shudder.

CHAPTER V.

NEIGHBOURS.

More than a week had passed since the scene in Malakoff Terrace described in my last chapter—a week spent by Mark in the drudgery of school work, which had grown more distasteful than ever now he could indulge in no golden dreams of a glorious deliverance; for he could not accept his new prospects as an adequate substitute, and was beginning to regret his abandonment of his true ambitions with a longing that was almost fierce.

He had gone down to 'The Woodbines,' his uncle's villa at Chigbourne, in pursuance of the invitation given him; and Mr. Lightowler's undisguised recovery of the feeling of proprietorship in him, and his repeated incitements to pursue his studies with unwearying ardour, only increased Mark's disgust with himself and his future, as he walked along the lanes with his relative towards the little church beyond the village on the last Sunday in November.

It was a bright, clear, frosty day, with a scarlet sun glowing through dun-coloured clouds, and a pale blue sky beyond the haze above their heads; the country landscape had suggestions of Christmas cheeriness, impossible enough to Londoners who cannot hope to share in country-house revels *à la* Washington Irving, but vaguely exhilarating notwithstanding.

Mark knew that his Christmas would be passed in town with his family, who would keep it as they observed Sunday, and refrain from any attempt at seasonable jollity; yet he began to feel elated by its approach, or the weather, or some instinct of youth and health which set his blood tingling and drove away his dissatisfaction with every step he took.

Uncle Solomon had come out in broadcloth, and a large hat with such an ecclesiastical brim that it influenced his conversation, causing it to be more appropriate than Sunday talk will sometimes be, even amongst the best people. He discoursed of Ritualism, and deplored the hold it had acquired on the vicar, and the secret manœuvres of the detested Humpage in the vestry.

'I was brought up a Baptist,' he said, 'and I'd go back to 'em now, if I didn't know how they'd all crow about it; and they're a poor lot at Little Bethel, too, not a pennypiece among 'em.'

'When we get into the church,' he continued, 'you give a look left of the chancel, close by the door where the shelf is with the poor-loaves. You'll see a painted winder there which that 'Umpage got put up to his aunt—that's his ostentation, that is. I don't believe he ever *had* an aunt; but I don't wish to judge him. Only you look at that window, and tell me how it strikes you afterwards. He's got the artist to do him as the Good Samaritan there! I call it scandalous!—there's no mistake about it; the hair's not the same colour, and the Eastern robes hide it a bit; but he's there for all that. I don't relish seeing 'Umpage figurin' away in painted glass and a great gaudy turban

every time I look up, he's quite aggravating enough in his pew. If I chose to go to the expense, *I* could put up a winder too, and have myself done.'

'As a saint?' suggested Mark.

'Never you mind. If I liked to be a saint on glass I could, I suppose—I'm a churchwarden, and there's no reason why 'Umpage should have all the painted winders to himself; but I shouldn't care to make myself so conspicuous. 'Umpage, now, he likes that sort of thing.'

This brought them to the church, a Perpendicular building with a decidedly 'Early English' smell in it, and Uncle Solomon led the way to his pew, stopping to nudge Mark as they passed the memorial to his enemy's meretricious aunt; he nudged him again presently, after he had retired behind the ecclesiastical hat and emerged again to deal out some very large prayer and hymn books as if they were cards.

'That's him—that's 'Umpage,' he said in a loud whisper.

Mark looked up in time to see an old gentleman advance to the door of the pew in front of them—a formidable-looking old gentleman, with a sallow face, long iron-grey locks, full grey eyes, a hook-nose, and prominent teeth under a yellowish-grey moustache and beard.

He felt a sudden shame, for behind Mr. Humpage came a pretty child with long floating light hair, with a staid fresh-faced woman in grey, and last a girl of about nineteen or twenty, who seemed to have caught the very audible whisper, for she glanced in its direction as she passed in with the slightest possible gleam of amused surprise in her eyes and a lifting of her delicate eyebrows.

A loud intoned 'Amen' came from the vestry just then, the organ played a voluntary, and the vicar and curate marched in at the end of a procession of little surpliced country boys, whose boots made a very undevotional clatter over the brasses and flagstones.

As a Low Churchman Mr. Lightowler protested against this processional pomp by a loud snort, which expression of opinion he repeated at any tendency to genuflexion on the part of the clergyman during the service, until the little girl turned round and gazed at him with large concerned eyes, as if she thought he must be either very devout or extremely unwell.

Mark heard little of the service; he was dimly aware of his uncle singing all the psalms and responses with a lusty tunelessness, and coming to fearful grief in gallant attempts to follow the shrill little choristers over a difficult country of turns and flourishes. He explained afterwards that he liked to set an example of 'joining in.'

But Mark saw little else but the soft shining knot of hair against the dark sables of the hat and tippet of his beautiful neighbour, and a glimpse of her delicate profile now and then, as she turned to find the places for her little sister, who invariably disdained assistance as long as possible. He began to speculate idly on her probable character. Was she proud?—there was a shade of disdain about her smile when he first saw her. Self-willed?—the turn of her graceful head was slightly imperious. She could be tender with it all—he inferred that from the confidence with which the child nestled against her as the sermon began, and the gentle protecting hand that drew her closer still.

Mark had been in and out of love several times in his life; his last affair had been with a pretty, shallow flirt with a clever manner picked up at secondhand, and though she had come to the end of her *répertoire* and ceased to amuse or interest him long before they parted by mutual consent, he chose to believe his heart for ever blighted and proof against all other women, so that he was naturally in the most favourable condition for falling an easy victim.

He thought he had never seen any one quite like this girl, so perfectly natural and unaffected, and yet with such an indefinable air of distinction in her least movement. What poems, what books might not be written, with such an influence to inspire them, and then Mark recollected with a pang that he had done with all that for ever now. That most delicate form of homage would be beyond his power, even if he ever had the opportunity of paying it, and the thought did not tend to reconcile him to his lot.

Would chance ever bring him within the sphere of his new-found divinity? Most probably not. Life has so many of these tantalising half-glimpses, which are never anything more. 'If she is Humpage's daughter,' he thought, 'I'm afraid it's hopeless; but she shall not pass out of my life if I can help it!' and so he dreamed through the sermon, with the vicar's high cracked voice forming a gentle clacking accompaniment, which he quite missed when the

benediction came upon him unexpectedly.

They came out of church into bright November sunshine; the sun had disengaged itself now from the dun clouds, melted the haze, and tempered the air almost to the warmth of early spring. Mark looked round for Mr. Humpage and his party, but without success; they had lingered behind, perhaps, as he could not help fearing, designedly. He determined, however, to find out what he could about them, and approached the subject diplomatically.

'I saw the window,' he began; 'that was the Good Samaritan in front, of course. I recognised him by the likeness at once.'

'He took care it should be like,' said Uncle Solomon, with a contemptuous sniff.

'That was his family with him, I suppose?' Mark asked carelessly.

''Umpage is a bachelor, or gives himself out for such,' said his uncle, charitably.

'Then those young ladies—are they residents here?'

'Which young ladies?'

'In his pew,' said Mark, a little impatiently, 'the little girl with the long hair, and—and the other one?'

'You don't go to church to stare about you, do you? *I* didn't take any notice of them; they're strangers here—friends of 'Umpage, I dare say. That was his sister in grey; she keeps house for him, and they say he leads her a pretty life with his tempers. Did you see that old woman behind in a black coalscuttle? That was old widow Barnjum; keeps a sweetstuff shop down in the village. I've seen her that far gone in liquor sometimes she can't find her way about and has to be taken 'ome in a barrow. You wouldn't think it to look at her, would you? I shall give the vicar the 'int to tell old John Barker he ought to stay away till he's got over that cough of his; it's enough to make anybody ill to listen to him. I've a good mind to tell him of it myself; and I will, too, if I come across him. The Colonel wasn't in church again. They tell me he's turned Atheist, and loafs about all Sunday with a gun. I've seen him myself driving a dog-cart Sunday afternoons in a pot 'at, and I knew then what would come of that. Here we are again!' he said, as they reached the palings of 'The Woodbines.' 'We'll just stroll round to get an appetite for dinner before we go in.'

Uncle Solomon led the way into the stables, where he lingered to slap his mare on the back and brag about her, and then Mark had to be introduced to the pig. 'What I call a 'andsome pig, yer know,' he remarked; 'a perfect picture, he is' (a picture that needed cleaning, Mark thought)—'you come down to me in another three weeks or so, and we'll try a bit off that chap'—an observation which seemed to strike the pig as in very indifferent taste, for he shook his ears, grunted, and retired to his sty in a pointed manner.

After that there was plenty to do and see before Mark was allowed to dine: Lassie, the collie, had to be unfastened for a run about the 'grounds,' of which a mechanical mouse might have made the tour in five minutes; there was a stone obelisk to be inspected that Uncle Solomon had bought a bargain at a sale and set up at a corner of the lawn inscribed with the names of his favourites living and dead—a remarkably scratch team, by the way; then he read out sonorous versions of the Latin names of most of his shrubs, which occupied a considerable time, until, at last, by way of the kitchen-garden and strawberry beds, they came to a little pond and rustic summer-house, near which the boundary fence was unconcealed by any trees or shrubs.

'See that gap?' said Mr. Lightowler, pointing to a paling of which the lower half was torn away; 'that's where 'Umpage's blathering old gander gets through. I 'ate the sight of the beast, and I'd sooner have a traction-engine running about my beds than him! I've spoke about it to 'Umpage till tired, and I shall 'ave to take the law into my own hands soon, I know I shall. There was Wilcox, my gardener, said something about some way he had to serve him out—but it's come to nothing. And now we'll go in for a wash before dinner.'

Uncle Solomon was a widower; a niece of his late wife generally lived with him and superintended his domestic affairs—an elderly person, colourless and cold, who, however, had a proper sense of her position as a decayed relative on the wife's side, and made him negatively comfortable; she was away just then, which was partly the reason why Mark had been invited to bear his uncle company.

They dined in a warm little room, furnished plainly but well; and after dinner Uncle Solomon gave Mark a cigar, and took down a volume of

American Commentaries on the Epistles, which he used to give a Sunday tone to his nap; but before it could take effect, there were sounds faintly audible through the closed windows, as of people talking at the end of the grounds.

Mr. Lightowler opened his drooping eyelids: 'There's some one in my garden,' he said. 'I must go out and put a stop to that—some of those urchins out of the village—they're always at it!'

He put on an old garden-hat and sallied out, followed by Mark: 'The voices seem to come down from 'Umpage's way, but there's no one to be seen,' he said, as they went along. 'Yes, there is, though; there's 'Umpage himself and his friends looking across the fence at something! What does he want to go staring on to *my* land for—like his confounded impudence!'

When they drew a little nearer, he stopped short and, turning to Mark with a face purple with anger, said, 'Well, of all the impudence—if he isn't egging on that infernal gander now—put him through the 'ole himself, I dare say!'

On arriving at the scene, Mark saw the formidable old gentleman of that morning glaring angrily over the fence; by his side was the fair and slender girl he had seen in church, while at intervals her little sister's wondering face appeared above the top of the palings, a small dog uttering short sharp barks and yelps behind her.

They were all looking at a large grey gander, which was unquestionably trespassing at that moment; but it was unjust to say, as Mr. Lightowler had said, that they were giving it any encouragement; the prevailing anxiety seemed to be to recover it, but as the fence was not low, and Mr. Humpage not quite young enough to care to scale it, they were obliged to wait the good pleasure of the bird.

And Mark soon observed that the misguided bird was not in a condition to be easily prevailed upon, being in a very advanced stage of solemn intoxication; it was tacking about the path with an erratic stateliness, its neck stretched defiantly, and its choked sleepy cackle said, 'You lemme 'lone now, I'm all ri', walk shtraight enough 'fiwan'to!' as plainly as bird-language could render it.

As Uncle Solomon bore down on it, it put on an air of elaborate indifference, meant to conceal a retreat to the gap by which it had entered, and began to waddle with excessive dignity in that direction, but from the way in which it repeatedly aimed itself at the intact portions of the paling, it seemed reasonable to infer that it was under a not infrequent optical illusion.

Mr. Lightowler gave a short and rather savage laugh. 'Wilcox *has* done it, then!' he said. Mark threw away his cigar, and slightly lifted his hat as he came up: he felt somewhat ashamed and strongly tempted to laugh at the same time; he dared not look at the face of Mr. Humpage's companion, and kept in the background as a dispassionate spectator.

Mr. Lightowler evidently had made up his mind to be as offensive as possible. 'Afternoon, Mr. 'Umpage,' he began; 'I think I've 'ad the pleasure of seeing this bird of yours before; he's good enough to come in odd times and assist my gardener; you'll excuse me for making the remark, however, but when he's like this I think he ought to be kep' indoors.'

'This is disgraceful, sir,' the other gentleman retorted, galled by this irony; 'disgraceful!'

'It's not pretty in a gander, I must say,' agreed Uncle Solomon, wilfully misunderstanding. 'Does it often forget itself in this way, now?'

'Poor dear goose,' chanted the little girl, reappearing at this juncture, 'it's *so* giddy; is it ill, godpapa?'

'Run away, Dolly,' said Mr. Humpage; 'it's no sight for you; run away.'

'Then Frisk mustn't look either; come away, Frisk,' and Dolly vanished again.

When she had gone, the old gentleman said, with a dangerous smile that showed all his teeth, 'Now, Mr. Lightowler, I think I'm indebted to you for the abominable treatment of this bird?'

'Someone's been treating it, it's very plain,' said the other, looking at the bird, which was making a feeble attempt to spread out its wings and screech contemptuously at the universe.

'You're equivocating, sir; do you think I can't see that poison has been laid in your grounds for this unhappy bird?'

'*It's* 'appy enough; don't you be uneasy, Mr. 'Umpage, there's been no worse poison given to it than some of my old Glenlivat,' said Mr. Lightowler; 'and, let me tell you, it's not every man, let alone every gander, as gets the luck to taste that. My gardener must have laid some of it down for—for agricultural purposes, and your bird, comin' in

through the 'ole (as you may p'r'aps remember I've spoke to you about before), has bin makin' a little too free with it, that's all. It's welcome as the flowers in May to it, only don't blame me if your bird is laid up with a bad 'eadache by-and-by—not that there's an 'eadache in the whole cask.'

At this point Mark could not resist a glance at the fair face across the fence. In spite of her feminine compassion for the bird and respect for its proprietor, Mabel had not been able to overcome a sense of the absurdity of the scene, with the two angry old gentlemen wrangling across the fence over an intoxicated gander; the face Mark saw was rippling with subdued amusement, and her dark grey eyes met his for an instant with an electric flash of understanding; then she turned away with a slight increase of colour in her cheeks.

'I'm going in, Uncle Anthony,' she said; 'do come, too, as soon as you can; don't quarrel about it any more—ask them to give you back the poor goose, and I'll take it into the yard again; it ought to go at once.'

'Let me manage it my own way,' said Mr. Humpage, testily. 'May I trouble you, Mr. Lightowler, to kindly hand me over that bird—when you have quite finished with it?' he added.

'That bird has been taking such a fancy to my manure heap that I'll ask to be excused,' said Mr. Lightowler. 'If you was to whistle to it now I might 'ead it through the 'ole; but it always finds it a good deal easier to come through than it does to come back, even when it's sober. I'm afraid you'll have to wait till it comes round a bit.'

At this the gander lurched against a half-buried flower-pot, and rolled helplessly over with its eyes closed.

'Oh, the poor thing,' cried Mabel, 'it's dying!'

'Do you see that?' demanded its owner, furiously; 'it's dying, and you've had it poisoned, sir; that soaked bread was put there by you or your orders—and, by the Lord, you shall pay for it!'

'I never ordered or put it there either,' said his enemy doggedly.

'We shall see about that—we shall see,' said Mr. Humpage; 'you can say that by-and-by.'

'It's no good losing your temper, now—keep cool, can't you?' roared Uncle Solomon.

'It's likely to make a man cool, isn't it? to come for a quiet stroll on Sunday afternoon, and find that his gander has been decoyed into a neighbour's garden and induced to poison itself with whisky!'

'Decoyed? I like that! pretty innercent, that bird of yours! too timid to come in without a reg'lar invitation, wasn't he?' jeered Mr. Lightowler; 'quite 'ad to press him to step in and do the garden up a bit. You and your gander!'

Mabel had already escaped; Mark remained trying to persuade his uncle to come away before the matter ceased to be farcical.

'I shall take this matter up, sir! I shall take it up!' said Mr. Humpage, in a white rage; 'and I don't think it will do you credit as a churchwarden, let me tell you!'

'Don't you go bringing that in here, now!' retorted Uncle Solomon. 'I'll not be spoken to as a churchwarden by you, Mr. 'Umpage, sir, of all parties!'

'You'll not be spoken to by anybody very soon—at any rate, as a churchwarden. I mean to bring this affair before the magistrates. I shall take out a summons against you for unlawfully ill-treating and abusing my gander, sir!'

'I tell you I never ill-treated him; as for abuse, I don't say. But that's neither here nor there. He ain't so thin-skinned as all that, your gander ain't. And if I choose to put whisky, or brandy, or champagne-cup about my grounds, I'm not obliged to consult your ridik'lous gander, I *do* hope. *I* didn't ask him to sample 'em. I don't care a brass button for your summonses. You can summon me till you're black in the face!'

But in spite of these brave words Mr. Lightowler was really not a little alarmed by the threat.

'We shall see about that,' said the other again, viciously. 'And now, once more, will you give me back my poor bird?'

Mark thought it had gone far enough. He took up the heavy bird, which made some maudlin objections, and carried it gingerly to the fence.

'Here's the victim, Mr. Humpage,' he said lightly. 'I think it will be itself again in a couple of hours or so. And now, perhaps, we can let the matter drop for the present.'

The old gentleman glared at Mark as he received his bird: 'I don't know who you may be, young sir, or what share you've had in this disgraceful business. If I trace it to you, you shall repent of it, I promise you! I don't wish to have

any further communication with you or your friend, who's old enough to know his duty better as a neighbour and a Christian. You will let him know, with my compliments, that he'll hear more of this.'

He retired with the outraged bird under his arm, leaving Uncle Solomon, who had of course heard his parting words, looking rather ruefully at his nephew.

'It's all very well for you to laugh,' he said to Mark, as they turned to go into the house again; 'but let me tell you if that hot-tempered old idiot goes and brings all this up at Petty Sessions, it may be an awkward affair for me. He's been a lawyer, has 'Umpage, and he'll do his worst. A pretty thing to have my name in all the papers about 'ere as torturing a goose! I dessay they'll try and make out that I poured the whisky down the brute's throat. It's Wilcox's doings, and none of mine; but they'll put it all on me. I'll drive over to Green & Ferret's to-morrow, and see how I stand. You've studied the law. What do *you* think about it, come? Can he touch me, eh? But he hasn't got a leg to stand on, like his gander—it's all nonsense, *ain't* it?'

If there had ever been a chance, Mark thought bitterly, after comforting his uncle as well as his very moderate acquaintance with the law permitted, of anything like intimacy between himself and the girl whose face had fascinated him so strangely, it was gone now: that bird of evil omen had baulked his hopes as effectually as its ancestors frustrated the aspiring Gaul.

The dusk was drawing on as they walked across the lawn, from which the russet glow of the sunset had almost faded; the commonplace villa before them was tinted with violet, and in the west the hedges and trees formed an intricate silhouette against a background of ruddy gold and pale lemon; one or two flamingo-coloured clouds still floated languidly higher up in a greenish blue sky; over everything the peace and calm had settled that mark the close of a perfect autumn day, with an additional stillness which always makes itself perceptible on a Sunday.

Mark felt the influence of it all, and was vaguely comforted—he remembered the passing interchange of glances across the fence, and it consoled him.

At supper that evening his uncle, too, recovered his spirits: 'If he brings a summons, they'll dismiss it,' he said confidently; 'but he knows better than that as a lawyer—if he does, he'll find the laugh turned against him, hey? I'm not answerable for what Wilcox chooses to do without my orders. I never told him he wasn't to—but that ain't like telling him to go and do it, is it now? And where's the cruelty, either?—a blend like that, too. Just try a glass, now, and say what you think—he'll be dropping in for more of it if he's the bird *I* take him for!'

But as they were going upstairs to bed, he stopped at the head of the staircase and said to Mark, 'Before I forget it, you remind me to get Wilcox to find out, quietly, the first thing to-morrow, how that gander is.'

CHAPTER VI.

SO NEAR AND YET SO FAR.

When Mark awoke next morning the weather had undergone one of those sudden and complete changes which form one of the chief attractions of our climate; there had been a frost, and with it a thin white mist, which threw its clinging veil over the landscape; the few trees which were near enough to be seen were covered with a kind of thick grey vegetation, that gave them a spectral resemblance to their summer selves. Breakfast was early, as Mark had to be down at St. Peter's as soon after morning chapel as possible, and he came down shivering, to find his uncle already seated.

'The dog-cart will be round in five minutes,' said the latter gentleman, with his mouth full; 'so make the most of your time. You'll have a cold drive. I'll take you over to the station myself, and go on and see Ferret after.'

The too-zealous Wilcox brought the trap round.

''Ave you been round to see about that bird next door?' Mr. Lightowler asked rather anxiously, as the man stood by the mare's head.

'Yessir,' said Wilcox, with a grin; 'I went and saw Mr. 'Umpage's man, and he say the old gander was werry bad when they got 'im 'ome, but he ain't any the worse for what he 'ad this mornin', sir; though the man, he dew say as the gander seem a bit sorry for 'isself tew. They tough old birds 'a' got strong 'eads, sir; *I* knowed it 'ud do him no 'arm, bless ye!'

'Well, don't you go trying it again, Wilcox, that's all. Mind what I say,' said Uncle Solomon, with visible relief. 'else you and me 'll 'ave words and part. Let her go,' and they drove off.

He gave Mark much good advice on the way, such as wealthy uncles seem to secrete and exude almost unconsciously, as toads yield moisture; but Mark paid only a moderate degree of attention to it as they spun past the low dim hedges; he hardly noticed what could be seen along the road even, which was not much—a gable-end or a haystack starting out for an instant from the fog, or a shadowy labourer letting himself through a gate—he was thinking of the girl whose eyes had met his the afternoon before.

He had dreamed of her all that night—a confused ridiculous dream, but with a charm about it which was lingering still; he thought they had met and understood one another at once, and he had taken her to the village church where he had first seen her, and they had a private box, and Uncle Solomon took the chair, while old Mr. Shelford, Trixie, and young Langton were all in the choir, which was more like an orchestra. It was not particularly connected or reverent, but she had not been included in the general travesty—his sleeping brain had respected her image even in its waywardness, and presented it as vivid and charming as in life, so that the dream with all its absurdity seemed to have brought her nearer to him, and he could not resist the fancy that *she* might have some recollection of it too.

A low hum in the still air, and distant reports and choked railway whistles told them they were near the station, but the fog had grown so much denser that there was no other indication of it, until Mr. Lightowler brought up sharply opposite the end of an inclined covered staircase, which seemed to spring out of nothing and lead nowhere, where they left the dog-cart in charge of a flyman and went up to the platform.

There a few old gentlemen with rosy faces were stamping up and down and slapping their chests, exchanging their 'Raw morning this, sir's,' 'Ah, it is indeed's,' with an air of good men bearing up under an undeserved persecution.

'Sharp morning this to stand about in,' said Uncle Solomon; 'let's go into the waiting-room, there's a fire there.' The waiting-room was the usual drab little room, with a bottle of water and tumblers on a bare stained table, and local advertisements on the dingy walls; the gas was lighted, and flickered in a sickly white fishtail flame, but the fire was blazing cheerfully, giving a sheen to the silver-grey fur coat of a child in a wide-brimmed felt hat who stood before it embracing a small round basket out of which a Skye terrier's head was peering inquisitively.

The firelight shone, too, on the graceful form of a girl, who was bending towards it holding out her slender hands to the blaze. Mark scarcely needed to glance at the face she turned towards the newcomers to recognise that fortune had allowed him one more chance: Mr. Humpage's visitors were evidently returning to town by the same train as himself, and the old gentleman in person was standing with his back to them examining a time-table on the wall.

Uncle Solomon, in his relief at Wilcox's information that morning, did not perceive any awkwardness in the encounter, but moved about and coughed noisily, as if anxious to attract his enemy's attention. Mark felt considerably embarrassed, dreading a scene; but he glanced as often as he dared at the lady of his thoughts, who was drawing on her gloves again with a dainty deliberation.

'Godpapa,' said the little girl, suddenly, 'you never told me if Frisk had been good. Has he?'

'So good that he kept me awake thinking of him all night,' said the old gentleman drily, without turning.

'Did he howl, grandpapa? He does sometimes when he's left out in the garden, you know.'

'He did,' said Mr. Humpage. 'Oh, yes—he howled; he's a clever dog at that.'

'And you really *like* him to?' said Dolly. 'Some people don't.'

'Narrow-minded of 'em, very,' growled the old gentleman.

'Isn't it?' said Dolly, innocently. 'Well, I'm glad *you* like it, godpapa, because now I shall bring him to see you again. When there's a moon he can howl much louder. I'll bring him when the next moon comes, shall I?'

'We'll see, Chuckie, we'll see. I shouldn't like to keep him sitting up all might to howl on my account; it wouldn't be good for his health. But the very next blue moon we have down in these parts, I'll send up for him—I promise you that.'

Dolly was evidently about to inquire searchingly into the nature of this local

phenomenon, but before she could begin the old gentleman turned, and saw that they were not alone.

'Mornin', Mr. 'Umpage,' said Uncle Solomon, clearing his throat; and Mark felt a pang of regret for the lost aspirate.

'Good morning to you, sir,' said the other, distantly.

The elder girl returned the bow which Mark risked, though without giving any sign of remembrance; but Dolly remarked audibly, 'Why, that's the old man next door that gave your goose something to make it giddy, isn't it, godpapa?'

'I hope,' said Uncle Solomon, 'that now you've had time to think over what happened yesterday afternoon, you'll see that you went too far in using the terms that fell from you, more particularly as the bird's as well as ever, from what I hear this morning?'

'I don't wish to reopen that affair at present,' said the other, stiffly.

'Well, I've heard about enough of it, too; so if you'll own you used language that was unwarrantable, I'm willing to say no more about it for my part.'

'I've no doubt you are, Mr. Lightowler, but you must excuse me from entering into any conversation on the subject. I can't dismiss it as lightly as you seem to do—and, in short, I don't mean to discuss it here, sir.'

'Very well, just as you please. I only meant to be neighbourly—but it don't signify. I can keep myself *to* myself as well as other parties, I dare say.'

'Then have the goodness to do it, Mr. Lightowler. Mabel, the train is due now. Get your wraps and things and come along.'

He walked fiercely past the indignant Uncle Solomon, followed by Mabel and Dolly, the former of whom seemed a little ashamed of Mr. Humpage's behaviour, for she kept her eyes lowered as she passed Mark, while Dolly looked up at him with childish curiosity.

'Confound these old fools!' thought Mark, angrily; 'what do they want to squabble for in this ridiculous way? Why, if they had only been on decent terms, I might have been introduced to her—to Mabel—by this time; we might even have travelled up to town together.'

'Regular old Tartar, that!' said his uncle, under his breath. 'I believe he'll try and have the law of me now. Let him—*I* don't care! Here's your train at last. You won't be in by the time-table this morning, with all this fog about.'

Mark got into a compartment next to that in which Mr. Humpage had put Mabel and her sister; it was as near as he dared to venture. He could hear Mabel's clear soft voice saying the usual last words at the carriage window, while Uncle Solomon was repeating his exhortations to study and abstinence from any 'littery nonsense.'

Then the train, after one or two false starts on the greasy rails, moved out, and Mark had a parting glimpse of the neighbours turning sharply round on the platform with an elaborate affectation of being utter strangers.

He had no paper to amuse him, for the station was not important enough for a bookstall, and there was nothing to be seen out of the windows, which were silvered with frozen moisture. He had the compartment to himself, and lay back looking up rather sentimentally at the bull's-eye, through which he heard occasional snatches of Dolly's imperious treble.

'I know her name now,' he thought, with a quite unreasonable joy—'Mabel. I shall remember that. I wonder if they are going all the way to town, and if I could offer to be of any use to them at King's Cross? At all events, I shall see her once more then.'

It was not a very long journey from Chigbourne to the terminus, but, as will be seen hereafter, it was destined to be a landmark in the lives of both Mark and Mabel, though the meeting he looked forward to at the end of it never took place.

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE FOG.

Mark was roused from his reverie in the railway carriage by the fact that the train, after slackening speed rather suddenly, had come to a dead standstill. 'Surely we can't be in already,' he said to himself, wondering at the way in which his thoughts had outstripped the time. But on looking out he found that he was mistaken—they were certainly not near the metropolis as yet, nor did they appear to have stopped at any station, though from the blank white fog which reigned all around, and drifted in curling wreaths through the window

he had let down, it was difficult to make very sure of this.

Along the whole length of the train conversation, no longer drowned by the motion, rose and fell in a kind of drone, out of which occasional scraps of talk from the nearer carriages were more distinctly audible, until there came a general lull as each party gave way to the temptation of listening to the other—for the dullest talk has an extraordinary piquancy under these circumstances, either because the speakers, being unseen, appeal to our imagination, or because they do not suppose that they are being so generally overheard.

But by-and-by it seemed to be universally felt that the stoppage was an unusual one, and windows went down with a clatter along the carriages, while heads were put out inquiringly. Every kind of voice demanded to be told where they were, and why they were stopping, and what the deuce the Company meant by it—inquiries met by a guard, who walked slowly along the line, with the diplomatic evasiveness which marks the official dislike to admit any possible hitch in the arrangements.

'Yes,' he said, stolidly; 'there might be a bit of a stoppage like; they'd be going on presently; he couldn't say how long that would be; something had gone wrong with the engine; it was nothing serious; he didn't exactly know what.'

But he was met just under Mark's window by the guard from the break at the end of the train, when a hurried conference took place, in which there was no stolidity on either side. 'Run back as quick as you can and set the detonators—there ain't a minute to lose, she may be down on us any time, and she'll never see the other signals this weather. I'd get 'em all out of the train if I was you, mate—they ain't safe where they are as it is, that they ain't!'

The one guard ran back to his break, and then on to set the fog-signals, while the other went to warn the passengers. 'All get out 'ere, please; all get out!' he shouted.

There was the usual obstructive person in the train who required to be logically convinced first of the necessity for disturbing himself; he put his head angrily out of a window near Mark's: 'Here, guard!' he shouted importantly; 'what's all this? *Why* am I to get out?'

'Because you'd better,' said the guard shortly.

'But why—where's the platform? I insist on being taken to a platform—I'm not going to break my leg getting out here.' Several people, who had half opened their doors, paused on the steps at this, as if recalled to a sense of their personal dignity.

'Do as you please, sir,' said the official; 'the engine's broke down, and we may be run into any minute in this fog; but if you'd be more comfortable up there——'

There was no want of alacrity after that, the obstructive man being the first down; all the rosy-faced gentlemen hopped out, some of the younger ones still grasping half-played hands of 'Nap' or 'Loo,' and made the best of their way down the embankment, and several old ladies were got out in various stages of flutter, narrowly escaping sprained ankles in the descent.

Mark, who had seen his opportunity from the first, had rushed to the door of the next compartment, caught Dolly in his arms as she jumped down, and, hardly believing in his own good fortune, held Mabel's hand in his for one happy moment as she stepped from the high and awkward footboard.

'Down the slope, quick,' he cried to them; 'get as far from the line as you can in case of a smash.'

Mabel turned a little pale, for she had not understood till then that there was any real danger.

'Keep close to me, Dolly,' she said, as they went down the slope; 'we're safe here.'

The fog had gathered thick down in the meadows, and nothing could be seen of the abandoned train when they had gone a few paces from the foot of the embankment; the passengers were moving about in excited groups, not knowing what horrors they might not be obliged to witness in the next few minutes. The excitement increased as one of them declared he could hear the noise of an approaching train.

'Only just in time—God help them if they don't pull up!' cried some, and a woman hoped that 'the poor driver and stoker were not on the engine.'

Dolly heard this, and broke from Mabel with a loud cry: 'Mabel, we've left Frisk!' she sobbed; 'he'll be killed—oh, my dog will be killed—he mustn't be left behind!'

And, to Mark's horror, she turned back, evidently with the idea of making for the point of danger; he ran after her, and caught the little silvery-grey form fast in his arms.

'Let me go!' cried Dolly, struggling; 'I must get him back—oh, I must!'

'He'll have jumped out by this time—he's quite safe,' said Mark, in her ear.

'He was sound asleep in his basket, he'll never wake if I don't call to him—why do you hold me? I tell you I *will* go!' persisted Dolly.

'No, Dolly, no,' said Mabel, bending over her; 'it's too late—it's hard to leave him, but we must hope for the best.' She was crying, too, for the poor doomed dog as she spoke.

Mark was hardly a man from whom anything heroic could be very confidently expected; he was no more unselfish than the generality of young men; as a rule he disliked personally inconveniencing himself for other people, and in cooler moments, or without the stimulus of Mabel's presence, he would certainly have seen no necessity to run the risk of a painful death for the sake of a dog.

But Mabel was there, and the desire of distinguishing himself in her eyes made a temporary hero out of materials which at first sight were not promising. He was physically fearless enough, and given to acting on impulses without counting the consequences; the impulse seized him now to attempt to rescue this dog, and he obeyed it blindly.

'Wait here,' he said to Mabel; 'I'll go back for him.'

'Oh, no—no,' she cried; 'it may cost you your life!'

'Don't stop him, Mabel,' entreated Dolly; 'he is going to save my dog.'

Mark had gone already, and was halfway up the slope, slippery as it was, with the grass clumped and matted together by the frost, and scored in long brown tracks by the feet that had just descended it.

Mabel was left to console and encourage the weeping Dolly as best she might, with a terrible suspense weighing on her own heart the while, not altogether on Frisk's account. At the point where the train had broken down the line took a bold curve, and now they could hear, apparently close upon them, the roar of a fast train sweeping round through the fog; there were some faint explosions, hoarse shouting, a long screeching whistle,—and after that the dull shock of a collision; but nothing could be seen from where they stood, and for some moments Mabel remained motionless, almost paralysed by the fear of what might be hidden behind the fog curtain.

Mark clambered painfully up the glistening embankment, hoping to reach the motionless carriages and escape with his object effected before the train he could hear in the distance ground into them with a hideous crash.

He knew his danger, but, to do him justice, he scarcely gave it a thought—any possible suffering seemed as remote and inconsiderable just then as the chance of a broken leg or collar-bone had been to him when running for a touchdown in his football days; the one idea that filled his brain was to return to Mabel triumphant with the rescued dog in his arms, and he had room for no others.

He went as directly as he could to the part of the train in which was the carriage he had occupied, and found it without much difficulty when he was near enough to make out forms through the fog; the door of Mabel's compartment was open, and, as he sprang up the footboard, he heard the train behind rattling down on him with its whistle screeching infernally, and for the first time felt an uneasy recollection of the horribly fantastic injuries described in accounts of so many railway collisions.

But there was no time to think of this; at the other end of the carriage was the little round wicker-basket he had seen in Dolly's hands at the Chigbourne waiting-room, and in it was the terrier, sleeping soundly as she had anticipated. He caught up the little drowsy beast, which growled ungratefully, and turned to leap down with it to the ballast, when there was a sharp concussion, which sent a jangling forward shock, increasing in violence as it went, along the standing train, and threw him violently against the partition of the compartment.

Meanwhile the passengers of the first train, now that the worst was apparently over, and the faint shouts and screams from the embankment had calmed down, began to make their way in the direction of the sounds, and Mabel, holding Dolly fast by the hand, forced herself to follow them, though she was sick and faint with the dread of what she might see.

The first thing they saw was a crowd of eager, excited faces, all questioning and accusing the badgered officials of both trains at the same time.

'Why was an empty train left on the rails unprotected in this way? They might have been all killed. It was culpable negligence all round, and there should be an inquiry—they would insist