I can't see there's something wrong? I'm hanged if I think it's safe to let you go about alone while you're looking like this; it isn't any—any hitch at Kensington Park Gardens, is it?' and there was a real anxiety in his tone as he asked this.

'No,' said Mark shortly, 'it's not that.'

'Have you got into any trouble, then, any scrape you don't see your way out of? You might do worse than tell me all about it.'

'There's nothing to tell,' said Mark, goaded past prudence by this persistence; 'it's only a letter, a rather important letter, which I brought out here to read quietly.'

'Why the deuce couldn't you say so before?' cried Caffyn. '*I* won't interrupt you; read your letter by all means, and I'll walk up and down here till you're ready for me—only don't make me think *you* want to cut me; you might wait till you're married for that, and you ought to know very well (if you don't) why I've been obliged, as it is, to decline the invitation to the marriage feast.'

Mark saw that for some reason Caffyn did not mean to be shaken off just then, and, as he could bear the suspense no longer, and knew that to walk about with Caffyn and talk indifferently of his coming happiness with that letter unread in his pocket would drive him mad, he had no choice but to accept the compromise. So he went to the bench and began to open the letter with trembling hands, while Caffyn paced up and down at a discreet distance.

'I see what it is now,' he thought, as he noticed the foreign envelope, 'I'm uncommonly glad I came up just then. Will he go through with it after this? Will he tell me anything, I wonder? Very little, I fancy, of what I know already. We shall see.'

This was the letter which Mark read, while the north-east wind roared through the boughs overhead, driving the gritty shell-dust in his face, and making the thin paper in his fingers flap with its vicious jerks:—

'Taliput Bungalow, Newera Ellia,
'Ceylon.

'My dear Mark,—I am not going to reproach you for your long silence, as I dare say you waited for me to write first. I have been intending to write again and again, and have been continually prevented, but I hardly expected to hear from you unless you had anything of importance to tell me. Something, however, has just come to my knowledge here which makes me fancy that you might have other reasons for not writing.' ('What does he mean by that?' thought Mark, in sudden terror, and for a moment dared not read on.) 'Have you by some strange chance been led to believe that I was on board the unfortunate "Mangalore" at the time of the disaster? because I see, on looking over some old Indian papers at the club here, that my name appears on the list of missing. As a matter of fact, I left the ship at Bombay. I had arranged to spend a day or two with some people, old friends of my father's, who have a villa on the Malabar Hill, but on my arrival there found a telegram from Ceylon, warning me to lose no time if I wished to see my father alive. The "Mangalore" was to stop several more days at Bombay, and I decided to go on at once overland to Madras and take my chance there of a steamer for Colombo, leaving my hosts to send down word to the ship of my change of plan. I can only suppose that there was some misunderstanding about this, and even then I cannot understand how the steward could have returned me as on board under the circumstances; but if only the mistake has given you no distress it is not of much consequence, as I wrote since my arrival here to the only other quarter in which the report might have caused alarm. To continue my story, I was fortunate enough to catch a boat at Madras, and so reached Colombo some time before the "Mangalore" was due there, and as I went on at once to Yatagalla, it is not to be wondered at if in that remote part of the country—up in Oudapusilava, in the hill district—it was long before I even heard of the wreck. There was not much society there, as you may imagine, the neighbouring estates being mostly held by native planters or managers, with whom my father had never, even when well, been at all intimate. Well, my poor father rallied a little and lingered for some time after my arrival His condition required my constant care, and I hope I was able to be of some comfort to him. When he died I thought it best to do what I could, with the overseer's assistance, to carry on the plantation until there was a good opportunity of disposing of it, and for a time it did seem as if my efforts were going to be rewarded—the life was hard and lonely enough, but it had its charms for a soli-

tary man like myself. Then everything seemed to go wrong at once. We had a bad season to begin with, and next fungus suddenly showed itself on the estate, and soon spread to such an extent that as a coffee plantation the place is quite worthless now, though I dare say they will be able to grow tea or cinchona on it. I have done with Yatagalla myself, having just succeeded in getting rid of it; naturally, not for a very large price per acre, but still I shall have enough altogether to live upon if I decide to carry on my old profession, or to start me fairly in some other line. But I am coming home first. (I can't call this island, lovely as most of it is, home.) There is nothing to keep me here any longer except my health, which has been anything but good for the last few months. I have been down with fever after fever; and this place, which I was ordered to as a health resort, is too damp and chilly to get really well in. So I shall make an effort to leave in about a fortnight by the P. and O. "Coromandel," which they tell me is a comfortable boat. After my experience of the "Mangalore," I prefer to trust this time to the regular "liners." I write this chiefly to ask you to do me a kindness if you possibly can. I have a sort of longing to see a friendly face on landing, and lately I have come to persuade myself that after all you may have good news to meet me with. Can you come? I have no time-tables here, but I calculate that the ship will reach Plymouth some time during the Easter holidays, so that, even if you are still at St. Peter's, your school duties will not prevent your coming. You can easily get the exact time we arrive by inquiring at the P. and O. offices in Leadenhall Street. We shall meet so soon now that I need write no more. As it is, there is another letter I must write—if I can, for you would hardly believe how difficult I find it to write at all in my present state, though a sea voyage will set me up again.'

The letter ended rather abruptly, the writing becoming almost illegible towards the close, as if the writer's strength had gradually failed him. Mark came to the end with a feeling that was almost relief; his chief dread had been to hear that he was found out, and that his exposure might be made public before he could make Mabel his own. It was terrible to know that the man he had injured was alive, but still it was something that he was still unaware of his injury; it was a respite, and, to a man of Mark's temperament, that was much. Even if Holroyd were strong enough to take his passage by the 'Coromandel,' he could hardly be in England for at least another fortnight, and long before he arrived at Plymouth the wedding would have taken place. And in a fortnight he might be able to hit upon something to soften some of the worst aspects of his fraud; the change in the title of the book, in the *nom de guerre*, and even the alterations of the text might be explained; but then there was that fatal concession of allowing his real name to appear: it was, he knew, to be placed on the title-page of the latest edition—would there be time to suppress that? This occurred to him but vaguely, for it seemed just then as if, when Mabel was once his wife, no calamity could have power to harm him, and now nothing Holroyd could do would prevent the marriage. After that the Deluge!

So he was almost his usual self as he rose and came towards Caffyn; his hand, however, still trembled a little, causing him to bungle in replacing the letter and drop the envelope, which the other obligingly picked up and restored to him.

'Ashburn, my dear fellow,' he began, as they walked on together, 'I hope you won't think me impertinent, but I couldn't help seeing the writing on that envelope, and it seems to me I knew it once, and yet—do you mind telling me if it's from any one I know?'

Mark would of course have preferred to say nothing, but it seemed best on the whole to avoid suspicion by telling the truth. Caffyn, as a friend of Vincent's, would hear it before long; it might look odd if he made any secret of it now, and so he told the tale of the escape much as the letter had given it. His companion was delighted, he laughed with pleasure, and congratulated Mark on the joy he supposed him to feel, until the latter could hardly bear it.

'Who would have hoped for this,' he said, 'when we were talking about the dead coming to life some time ago, eh? and yet it's happened—poor, dear old Vincent! And did you say he is coming home soon?'

'Very soon; in about a fortnight,' said Mark; 'he—he wants me to go down to Plymouth and meet him, but of course I can't do that.'

'A fortnight!' cried Caffyn. 'Capital! But how do you make it out, though?'

'Easily,' said Mark; 'he talks of coming by the "Coromandel" and starting about a fortnight after he wrote—so——'

'I see,' said Caffyn; 'I suppose you've looked at the date? No? Then let me—look here, it's more than five weeks old—look at the postmark—why, it's been in England nearly a fortnight!'

'It was delayed at my people's,' said Mark, not seeing the importance of this at first, 'that's how it was.'

'But—but don't you see?' Caffyn said, excitedly for him, 'if he really has sailed by this "Coromandel," he must be very near now. He might even be in Plymouth by this time.'

'Good God!' groaned Mark, losing all control as the truth flashed upon him, while the grey grass heaved under his unstable feet.

Caffyn was watching him, with a certain curiosity which was not without a malicious amusement. 'You didn't expect that,' he said. 'It's capital, isn't it?'

'Capital!' murmured Mark.

'He'll be in time for your wedding,' pursued Caffyn.

'Yes,' said Mark heavily, 'he'll be in time for that now.'

Yes, his doom was advancing upon him fast, and he must wait patiently for it to fall; he was tied down, without possibility of escape, unless he abandoned all hope of Mabel. Perhaps he might as well do that first as last.

'Well,' said Caffyn, 'what are you going to do about it?'

'Do?' echoed Mark. 'What can I do? I shall see him soon enough, I suppose.'

'That's a composed way of expecting a long-lost friend certainly,' said Caffyn, laughing.

'Can't you understand,' retorted Mark, 'that—that, situated as I am . . . coming at such a time as this . . . even a man's dearest friend might be—might be——'

'Rather in the way? Why, of course, I never thought of that—shows how dull I'm getting! He *will* be in the way—deucedly in the way, if he comes! After all, though, he may *not* come!'

'Let us find out,' said Mark; 'surely there's some way of finding out.'

'Oh yes,' said Caffyn. 'I dare say they can tell us at the offices. We'll have a cab and drive there now, and then we shall know what to do. Leadenhall Street, isn't it?'

They walked sharply across to the Bayswater Road, where they could get a hansom; and as they drove along towards the City, Mark's hopes began to rise. Perhaps Holroyd was not on board the 'Coromandel'—and then he tried to prepare himself for the contrary. How should he receive Vincent when he came? for of course he would seek him out at once. The desperate idea of throwing himself on his friend's mercy occurred to him; if he could be the first to tell Holroyd the truth, surely he would consent to arrange the matter without any open scandal! He would not wish to ruin him so long as he received his own again. Both Caffyn and Mark were very silent during that long and wearisome drive, with its frequent blocks in the crowded City thoroughfares; and when they arrived at last at the courtyard in front of the offices, Mark said to his companion, '*You* manage this, will you?' for he felt quite unequal to the task himself.

They had to wait some time at a broad mahogany counter before a clerk was at liberty to attend to them, for the office was full of people making various inquiries or paying passage money. Mark cursed the deliberation with which the man before them was choosing his berth on the cabin plan submitted to him; but at last the precautions against the screw and the engines and the kitchens were all taken, and the clerk proceeded to answer Caffyn's questions in the fullest and most obliging manner. He went with them to the telegram boards by the doors, and after consulting a despatch announcing the 'Coromandel's' departure from Gibraltar, said that she would probably be at Plymouth by the next evening, or early on the following morning.

'Now find out if *he's* on board her,' said Mark; and his heart almost stopped when the clerk came back with a list of passengers and ran his finger down the names.

'V. B. Holroyd—is that your friend? If you think of meeting him at Plymouth, you have only to see our agents there, and they will let you know when the tender goes out to take the passengers ashore.'

After that Mark made his way out blindly, followed by Caffyn.

'Let us talk here; it's quieter,' said the latter when they were in the courtyard again.

'What's the good of talking?' said Mark.

'Don't you think you ought to go down to Plymouth?' suggested Caffyn.

'No,' said Mark, 'I don't. How can I, now?'

'Oh, I know you're wanted for exhibition, and all that, but you could plead business for one day.'

'What is the use?' said Mark. 'He will come to me as soon as he gets to town.'

'No, he won't, my boy,' said Caffyn; 'he will go and see the Langtons, even before such a devoted friend as you are. Didn't you know he was like one of the family there?'

'I have heard them mention him,' said the unhappy Mark, on whom a dreadful vision had flashed of Holroyd learning the truth by some innocent remark of Mabel's. 'I—I didn't know they were intimate.'

'Oh yes,' said Caffyn; 'they'll make a tremendous fuss over him. Now look here, my dear fellow, let's talk this over without any confounded sentiment. Here's your wedding at hand, and here's a long-lost intimate friend about to turn up in the midst of it. You'd very much prefer him to stay away; there's nothing to be ashamed of in that. I should myself if I were in your shoes. No fellow cares about playing second fiddle at his own wedding. Now, I've got a little suggestion to make. I was going down to Wastwater to-morrow, but I wouldn't much mind waiting another day if I could only get a fellow to come with me. I always liked Holroyd, you know—capital good chap he is, and if you leave me to manage him, I believe I could get him to come. I own I rather funk Wastwater all alone at this time of year.'

'He wouldn't go,' said Mark hopelessly.

'He would go there as readily as anywhere else, if you left it to me. I tell you what,' he added, as if the idea had just occurred to him, 'suppose *I* go down to Plymouth and catch him there? I don't mind the journey a bit.'

'No,' said Mark; '*I* am going to meet him. I must be the first to see him. After that, if he likes to go away with you, he can.'

'Then you *are* going down after all?' said Caffyn. 'What are you going to say to him?'

'That is my affair,' said Mark.

'Oh, I beg pardon! I only meant that if you say anything to him about this wedding, or even let him think the Langtons are in town, I may as well give up any idea of getting him to come away with me. Look here! you might do me a good turn, particularly when you know you won't be sorry to get him off your hands yourself. Tell him you're going abroad in a day or two (that's true; you're going to Switzerland for your honeymoon, you know), and let him think the Langtons are away somewhere on the Continent. It's all for his good; he'll want mountain air and a cheerful companion like me to put him right again. He'll be the first to laugh at an innocent little deception like that.'

But Mark had done with deceptions, as he told himself.

'I shall tell him what I think he ought to know,' he said firmly, and Caffyn, with all his keenness, mistook the purpose in his mind.

'I'll take that for an answer,' he said, 'and I shan't leave town to-morrow on the chance of his being able to go.' And so they parted.

'Ought I to have let him see that I knew?' Caffyn was thinking when he was alone again. 'No, I don't want to frighten him. I think he will play my game without it.'

Mark went back to the Langtons' and dined there. Afterwards he told Mabel privately that he would be obliged to leave town for a day or two on pressing business. There was no mistaking his extreme reluctance to go, and she understood that only the sternest necessity took him away at such a time, trusting him too entirely to ask any questions.

But as they parted she said, 'It's only for two days, Mark, isn't it?'

'Only for two days,' he answered.

'And soon we shall be together—you and I—for all our lives,' she said softly, with a great happiness in her low tones. 'I ought to be able to give you up for just two days, Mark!'

Before those two days were over, he thought, she might give him up for ever! and the thought that this was possible made it difficult for him to part as if all were well. He went back and passed a sleepless night, thinking over the humiliating task he had set himself. His only chance of keeping Mabel now lay in making a full confession to Holroyd of his perfidy; he would offer a complete restitution in time. He would plead so earnestly that his friend *must* forgive him, or at least consent to stay his hand for the present. He would humble himself to any extent, if that would keep him from losing Mabel alto-

gether—anything but that. If he lost her now, the thought of the happiness he had missed so narrowly would drive him mad.

It was a miserably cold day when he left Paddington, and he shivered under his rug as he sat in the train. He could hardly bear the cheerful talk of meeting or parting friends at the various stations at which the train stopped. He would have welcomed a collision which would deal him a swift and painless death, and free him from the misery he had brought upon himself. He would have been glad, like the lover in 'The Last Ride Together'—although for very different reasons—if the world could end that day, and his guilt be swallowed up in the sum of iniquity. But no collision occurred, and (as it is perhaps unnecessary to add) the universe did not gratify him by dissolving on that occasion. The train brought him safely to the Plymouth platform, and left him there to face his difficulty alone. It was about six o'clock in the evening, and he lost no time in inquiring at his hotel for the P. and O. agents, and in making his way to their offices up the stony streets and along a quiet lane over the hill by Hoegate. He was received with courtesy and told all that he wished to know. The 'Coromandel' was not in yet; would not be in now until after dark—if then. They would send him word if the tender was to go out the next morning, said the agent as he wrote him the necessary order to go on board her. After that Mark went back to the hotel and dined—or rather attempted to dine—in the big coffee-room by the side of a blazing fire that was powerless to thaw the cold about his heart, and then he retired to the smoking-room, which he had all to himself, and where he sat staring grimly at the leather benches and cold marble-topped tables around him, while he could hear muffled music and applause from the theatre hard by, varied by the click of the balls in the billiard-room at the end of the corridor. Presently the waiter announced a messenger for him, and on going out into the hall he found a man of seafaring appearance, who brought him a card stating that the tender would leave the Millbay Pier at six the next morning, by which time the 'Coromandel' would most probably be in. Mark went up to his bedroom that night as to a condemned cell; he dreaded another night of sleepless tossing. Sleep came to him, however, merciful and dreamless, as it will sometimes to those in desperate case, but he yielded to it with terror as he felt it coming upon him—for it brought the morning nearer.

CHAPTER XXIX.

ON BOARD THE 'COROMANDEL.'

It was quite dark the next morning when the hammering of the 'boots' outside the door roused Mark to a miserable sense of the unwelcome duty before him. He dressed by candlelight, and, groping his way down the silent staircase, hunted about in the shuttered coffee-room for the coat and hat he had left there, and went shivering out into the main street, from which he turned up the hill towards the Hoe. The day had dawned by that time, and the sky was a gloomy grey, varied towards the horizon by stormy gleams of yellow; the prim clean streets were deserted, save by an occasional workman going to his labours with a heavy tramp echoing on the wet flags. Mark went along by terraces of lodging-houses, where the placards of 'apartments' had an especially forlorn and futile look against the drawn blinds, and from the areas of which the exhalations, confined during the night, rose in perceptible contrast with the fresh morning air. Then he found himself upon the Hoe, with its broad asphalt promenades and rows of hotels and terraces, rain-washed, silent, and cold, and, descending the winding series of steps, he made his way to the Millbay Pier, and entered the Custom House gates. Waiting about the wharf was a little knot of people, apparently bound on much the same errand as himself—although in far higher spirits. Their cheerfulness (probably a trifle aggravated by the consciousness of being up so early) jarred upon him, and he went on past them to the place where two small steamers were lying.

'One of 'em's a-goin' out to the "Coromandel" presently,' said a sailor in answer to his question; 'you'd better wait till the agent's down, or you may be took out to the wrong ship—for there's two expected, but they ain't neither of 'em in yet. Ah!' as a gun was heard outside, 'that'll be the "Coromandel" signallin' now.'

'That ain't her,' said another man, who was leaning over the side of one of the tenders, 'that's the t'other one—

the "Emu"; the "Coromandel's" a three-master, *she* is.'

'Tom knows the "Coromandel"—don't ye, Tom? Let Tom alone for knowing the "Coromandel"!' said the first sailor—a remark which apparently was rich in hidden suggestion, for they both laughed very heartily.

Presently the agent appeared, and Mark, having satisfied himself that there was no danger of being taken out to the wrong vessel (for, much as he dreaded meeting Holroyd, he dreaded missing him even more), went on board one of the tenders, which soon after began to move out into the dull green water. Now that he was committed to the ordeal his terrors rose again; he almost wished that he had made a mistake after all, and was being taken out to meet the wrong P. and O. The horrible fear possessed him that Holroyd might in some way have learned his secret on the voyage home. Suppose, for instance, a fellow-passenger possessed a copy of 'Illusion,' and chanced to lend it to him—what should he do if his friend were to meet him with a stern and contemptuous repulse, rendering all conciliation out of the question? Tortured by speculations like these, he kept nervously away from the others on board, and paced restlessly up and down near the bows; he saw nothing consciously then, but afterwards every detail of those terrible ten minutes came back to him vividly, down to the lights still hanging in the rigging of the vessels in harbour, and the hoarse cries of the men in a brown-sailed lugger gliding past them out to sea. Out by the bar there was a light haze, in the midst of which lay the long black hull of the 'Coromandel,' and to this the tender worked round in a tedious curve preparatory to lying alongside. As they passed under the stern Mark nerved himself to look amongst the few figures at the gangway for the face he feared—but Holroyd was not amongst them. After several unsuccessful attempts of a Lascar to catch the rope thrown from the tender, accompanied by some remarks in a foreign language on his part which *may* have been offered in polite excuse for his awkwardness, the rope was secured at length, the tender brought against the vessel's side, and the gangway lashed across. Then followed a short delay, during which the P. and O. captain, in rough-weather costume, conversed with the agent across the rails with a certain condescension.

'Thick as a hedge outside,' Mark heard him say; 'haven't turned in all night. What are we all waiting for now? Here, quartermaster, just ask the doctor to step forward, will you?'

Somehow, at the mention of the doctor, Holroyd's allusions to his illness recurred to Mark's mind, and hopes he dared not confess even to himself, so base and vile were they, rose in his heart.

'Here's the doctor; clean bill of health, eh, doctor?' asked the agent—and Mark held his breath for the answer.

'All well on board.'

'Tumble in, then;' and there was an instant rush across the gangway. Mark followed some of the crowd down into the saloon, where the steward was laying breakfast, but he could not see Holroyd there either, and for a few minutes was pent up in a corner in the general bustle which prevailed.

There were glad greetings going on all around him, confused questions and answers, rapid directions to which no one had time to attend, and now and then an angry exclamation over the eagerly read letters: 'And where's mother living now?' 'We've lost that 7.40 express all through that infernal tender!' 'Look here, don't take that bag up on deck to get wet, d'ye hear?' 'Jolly to be back in the old place again, eh?' 'I wish I'd never left it—that d——d scoundrel has gone and thrown all those six houses into Chancery!' and so on, those of the passengers who were not talking or reading being engaged in filling up the telegraph forms brought on board for their convenience. Mark extricated himself from the hubbub as soon as he could, and got hold of the steward. There was a gentleman on board of the name of Holroyd; he seemed well enough, as far as the steward knew, though a bit poorly when he first came aboard, to be sure; he was in his berth just then getting his things together to go ashore, but he'd be up on deck directly. Half sick and half glad at this additional delay, Mark left the saloon and lingered listlessly about above, watching the Lascars hauling up baggage from the hold—they would have been interesting enough to him at any other time, with their seamed bilious complexions of every degree of swarthiness, set off by the touches of colour in their sashes and head coverings, their strange cries and still more uncouth jocularity—but he soon tired of them, and wandered aft, where the steamer-chairs, their usefulness at an

end for that voyage, were huddled together dripping and forlorn on the damp red deck.

He was still standing by them, idly turning over the labels attached to their backs, and reading the names thereon without the slightest real curiosity, when he heard a well-remembered voice behind him crying, 'Mark, my dear old fellow, so you've come after all! I was half afraid you wouldn't think it worth your while. I can't tell you how glad I am to see you!' And he turned with a guilty start to face the man he had wronged.

'Evidently,' thought Mark, 'he knows nothing yet, or he wouldn't meet me like this!' and he gripped the cordial hand held out to him with convulsive force; his face was white and his lips trembled, he could not speak.

Such unexpected emotion on his part touched and gratified Holroyd, who patted him on the shoulder affectionately.

'It's all right, old boy, I understand,' he said; 'so you *did* think I was gone after all? Well, this is a greater pleasure to me than ever it can be to you.'

'I never expected to see you again,' said Mark, as soon as he could speak; 'even now I can hardly believe it.'

'I'm quite real, however,' said Holroyd, laughing; 'there's more of me now than when they carried me on board from Colombo; don't look so alarmed—the voyage has brought me round again. I'm my old self again.'

As a matter of fact there was a great change in him; his bearded face, still burnt by the Ceylon sun, was lined and wasted, his expression had lost its old dreaminess, and, when he did not smile, was sterner and more set than it had been; his manner, as Mark noticed later, had a new firmness and decision; he looked a man who could be mercilessly severe in a just cause, and even his evident affection was powerless to reassure Mark.

The hatches had by this time been closed over the hold again and the crane unshipped, the warning bell was ringing for the departure of the tender, though the passengers still lingered till the last minute, as if a little reluctant, after all, to desert the good ship that had been their whole world of late; the reigning beauty of the voyage, who was to remain with the vessel until her arrival at Gravesend, was receiving her last compliments during prolonged and complicated leave-takings, in which, however, the exhilaration of most of her courtiers—now that their leave or furlough was really about to begin—was too irrepressible for sentiment. A delay at the gangway, where the captain and ship's officers were being overwhelmed with thanks and friendly goodbyes, and then the deck was cleared at last, the gangway taken in and the rail refastened, and, as the tender steamed off, all the jokes and allusions which formed the accumulated wit of the voyage flashed out with a brief and final brilliancy, until the hearty cheering given and returned drowned them for ever.

On the tender, such acquaintances as Holroyd had made during the voyage gave Mark no chance of private conversation with him, and even when they had landed and cleared the Custom House, Mark made no use of his opportunity; he knew he must speak soon, but he could not tell him just then, and accordingly put off the evil hour by affecting an intense interest in the minor incidents of the voyage, and in Vincent's experiences of a planter's life. It was the same in the hotel coffee-room, where some of the 'Coromandel's' passengers were breakfasting near them, and the conversation became general; after breakfast, however, Mark proposed to spend some time in seeing the place, an arrangement which he thought would lead the way to confession. But Holroyd would not hear of this; he seemed possessed by a feverish impatience to get to London without delay, and very soon they were pacing the Plymouth railway platform together, waiting for the up train, Mark oppressed by the gloomy conviction that if he did not speak soon, the favourable moment would pass away, never to return.

'Where do you think of going to first when you get in?' he asked, in dread of the answer.

'I don't know,' said Holroyd; 'the Great Western, I suppose—it's the nearest.'

'You mustn't go to an hotel,' said Mark; 'won't you come to my rooms? I don't live with my people any longer, you know, and I can easily put you up.' He was thinking that this arrangement would give him a little more time for his confession.

'Thanks,' said Holroyd gratefully; 'it's very kind of you to think of that, old fellow; I will come to you, then—

but there is a house I must go to as soon as we get in; you won't mind if I run away for an hour or two, will you?'

Mark remembered what Caffyn had said. 'There will be plenty of time for that to-morrow, won't there?' he said nervously.

'No,' said Holroyd impatiently; 'I can't wait. I daren't. I have let so much time go by already—you will understand when I tell you all about it, Mark. I can't rest till I know whether there is still a chance of happiness left for me, or—or whether I have come too late and the dream is over.'

In that letter which had fallen into Caffyn's hands Holroyd had told Mabel the love he had concealed so long; he had begged her not to decide too hastily; he would wait any time for her answer, he said, if she did not feel able to give it at once; and in the meantime she should be troubled by no further importunities on his part. This was not, perhaps, the most judicious promise to make; he had given it from an impulse of consideration for her, being well aware that she had never looked upon him as a possible lover, and that his declaration would come upon her with a certain shock. Perhaps, too, he wanted to leave himself a margin of hope as long as possible to make his exile endurable; since for months, if no answer came back to him, he could cheat himself with the thought that such silence was favourable in itself; but even when he came to regret his promise, he shrank from risking all by breaking it. Then came his long illness, and the discovery at Newera Ellia; for the first time he thought that there might be other explanations of the delay, and while he was writing the letter which had come to Mark, he resolved to make one more appeal to Mabel, since it might be that his first by some evil chance had failed to reach her. That second appeal, however, was never made. Before he could do more than begin it, the fever he had never wholly shaken off seized him again and laid him helpless, until, when he was able to write once more, he was already on his way to plead for himself. But the dread lest his own punctilious folly and timidity had closed the way to his heart's desire had grown deeper and deeper, and he felt an impulse now which was stronger than his natural reserve to speak of it to some one.

'Yes,' he continued, 'she may have thought I was drowned, as you did; perhaps she has never dreamed how much she is to me: if I could only hope to tell her that even now!'

'Do you mind telling me her name?' said Mark, with a deadly foreboding of what was coming.

'Did I never speak of the Langtons to you?' said Holroyd. 'I think I must have done so. She is a Miss Langton. Mabel, her name is' (he dwelt on the name with a lover's tenderness). 'Some day if—if it is all well, you may see her, I hope. Oddly enough, I believe she has heard your name rather often; she has a small brother who used to be in your form at St. Peter's; did I never tell you?'

'Never,' said Mark. He felt that fate was too hard for him; he had honestly meant to confess all up to that moment, he had thought to found his strongest plea for forbearance on his approaching marriage. How could he do that now? What mercy could he expect from a rival? He was lost if he was mad enough to arm Holroyd with such a weapon; he was lost in any case, for it was certain that the weapon would not lie hidden long; there were four days still before the wedding—time enough for the mine to explode! What could he do? How could he keep the other in the dark, or get rid of him, before he could do any harm? And then Caffyn's suggestions came back to him. Was it possible to make use of Caffyn's desire for a travelling companion, and turn it to his own purpose? If Caffyn was so anxious to have Holroyd with him in the Lakes, why not let him? It was a desperate chance enough, but it was the only one left to him; if it failed, it would ruin him, but that would certainly happen if he let things take their course; if it succeeded, Mabel would at least be his. His resolution was taken in an instant, and carried out with a strategy that gave him a miserable surprise at finding himself so thorough a Judas.

'By the way,' he said, 'I've just thought of something. Harold Caffyn is a friend of mine. I know he wants to see you again, and he could tell you all you want to hear about—about the Langtons, I've heard *him* mention them often enough; you see you don't even know where they are yet. I'll wire and ask him to meet us at my rooms, shall I?'

'That's a capital idea!' cried Holroyd. 'Caffyn is sure to know; do it at once, like a good fellow.'

'You stay here, then, and look out for

"IS HE BOLD ENOUGH TO DENY IT?"

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the train,' said Mark, as he hurried to the telegraph office, leaving Holroyd thinking how thoughtful and considerate his once selfish friend had become. Mark sent the telegram, which ended, 'He knows nothing as yet. I leave him to you.'

When he returned he found that Holroyd had secured an empty compartment in the train which was preparing to start, and Mark got in with a heavy apprehension of the danger of a long journey alone with Holroyd. He tried to avoid conversation by sheltering himself behind a local journal, while at every stoppage he prayed that a stranger might come to his rescue. He read nothing until a paragraph, copied from a London literary paper, caught his eye. 'We understand,' the paragraph ran, 'that the new novel by the author of "Illusion," Mr. Cyril Ernstone (or rather Mr. Mark Ashburn, as he has now declared himself), will be published early in the present spring, and it is rumoured that the second work will show a marked advance on its predecessor.' It was merely the usual puff preliminary, though Mark took it as a prediction, and at any other time would have glowed with anticipated triumph. Now it only struck him with terror. Was it in Holroyd's paper too? Suppose he asked to look at Mark's, and saw it there, and questioned him, as of course he would! What should he say? Thinking to avoid this as far as possible, he crumpled up the tell-tale paper and hurled it out of the window; but his act had precisely the opposite effect, for Holroyd took it as an indication that his companion was ready for conversation, and put down the paper he had been pretending to read.

'Mark,' he began with a slight hesitation, and with his first words Mark knew that the question was coming which he dreaded more than anything; he had no notion how he should reply to it, beyond a general impression that he would have to lie, and lie hard.

'Mark,' said Holroyd again, 'I didn't like to worry you about it before, I thought perhaps you would speak of it first; but—but have you never heard anything more of that ambitious attempt of mine at a novel? You needn't mind telling me.'

'I—I *can't* tell you,' Mark said, looking away out of window.

'I don't expect anything good,' said Holroyd; 'I never thought—why should I be such a humbug! I *did* think sometimes—more lately perhaps—that it wouldn't be an utter failure. I see I was wrong. Well, if I was ambitious, it was rather for her than myself; and if she cares for me, what else matters to either of us? Tell me all about it.'

'You—you remember what happened to the first volume of the "French Revolution?"' began Mark.

'Go on,' said Holroyd.

'It—the book—*yours*, I mean,' said Mark (he could not remember the original title), 'was burnt.'

'Where? at the office? Did they write and tell you so? Had they read it?'

Mark felt he was among pitfalls.

'Not at the office,' he said; 'at my rooms—my old rooms.'

'It came back, then?'

'Yes, it came back. There—there was no letter with it; the girl at the lodgings found the manuscript lying about. She—she burnt it.'

The lies sprang in ready succession from his brain at the critical moment, without any other preparation than the emergency—as lies did with Mark Ashburn; till lately he had hoped that the truth might come, and he loathed himself now for this fresh piece of treachery, but it had saved him for the present, and he could not abandon it.

'I thought it would at least have been safe with you,' said Holroyd, 'if you—no, my dear fellow, I didn't mean to reproach you. I can see how cut up you are about it; and, after all, it—it was only a rejected manuscript—the girl only hastened its course a little. Carlyle re-wrote his work; but then I'm not Carlyle. We won't say anything any more about it, eh, old fellow? It's only one dream over.'

Mark was seized with a remorse which almost drove him to confess all and take the consequences; but Holroyd had sunk back to his position by the window again, and there was a fixed frown on his face which, although it only arose from painful thought, effectually deterred Mark from speaking. He felt now that everything depended on Caffyn. He sat looking furtively at the other now and then, and thinking what terrible reproaches those firm lips might utter; how differently the sad, kind eyes might regard him before long, and once more he longed for a railroad crash which would set him free from his tangled life. The journey ended at last, and they drove to South Audley Street. Vincent was very silent; in spite of his philosophical bearing, he felt the blow deeply. He

had come back with ideas of a possible literary career before him, and it was hard to resign them all at once. It was rather late in the afternoon when they arrived, and Caffyn was there to receive them; he was delighted to welcome Holroyd, and his cordiality restored the other to cheerfulness; it is so pleasant to find that one is not forgotten—and so rare. When Vincent had gone upstairs to see his sleeping-room, Caffyn turned to Mark: there was a kind of grin on his face, and yet a certain admiration too.

'I got your telegram,' he said. 'So —so you've brought yourself to part with him after all?'

'I thought over what you said,' returned Mark, 'and—and he told me something which would make it very awkward and—and painful for him, and for myself too, if he remained.'

'You haven't told him anything, then, still?'

'Nothing,' said Mark.

'Then,' said Caffyn, 'I think I shall not be alone at Wastwater after all, if you'll only let me manage.'

Was Mark at all surprised at the languid Harold Caffyn exerting himself in this way? If he was, he was too grateful for the phenomenon to care very much about seeking to explain it. Caffyn was a friend of his, he had divined that Holroyd's return was inconvenient: very likely he had known of Vincent's hopeless attachment for Mabel, and he was plainly anxious to get a companion at the Lakes; any one of these was motive enough. Soon after, Holroyd joined them in the sitting-room. Caffyn, after more warm congratulations and eager questioning, broached the Wastwater scheme.

'You may as well,' he concluded, 'London's beastly at this time of year. You're looking as if the voyage hadn't done you much good, too, and it will be grand on the mountains just now. Come with me by the early train to-morrow; you've no packing to do. I'm sure we shall pull together all right.'

'I'm sure of that,' said Vincent; 'and if I had nothing to keep me in town—— but I've not seen the Langtons yet, you know. And, by-the-by, you can tell me where I shall find them now. I suppose they have not moved?'

'Now I've got you!' laughed Caffyn; 'if the Langtons are the only obstacle, you can't go and see them, for the very good reason that they're away—abroad somewhere!'

'Are they all there?'

'Every one of 'em; even the father, I fancy, just now.'

'Do you know when they're likely to be back?'

'Haven't heard,' said Caffyn calmly; 'they must come back soon, you see, for the lovely Mabel's wedding.'

Mark held his breath as he listened; what was Caffyn going to say next? Vincent's face altered suddenly.

'Then Mabel—Miss Langton, is going to be married?' he asked in a curiously quiet tone.

'Rather,' said Caffyn; 'brilliant match in its way, I understand. Not much money on his side, but one of the coming literary fellows, and all that kind of thing, you know; just the man for that sort of girl. Didn't you know about it?'

'No,' said Holroyd uneasily; he was standing with his elbow on the mantelpiece, with his face turned from the other two; 'I didn't know—what is his name?'

'Upon my soul I forget—heard it somewhere.—Ashburn, you don't happen to know it, do you?'

'I!' cried Mark, shrinking; 'no, I— I haven't heard.'

'Well,' continued Caffyn, 'it isn't of much consequence, is it? I shall hit upon it soon, I dare say. They say she's deucedly fond of him, though. Can't fancy disdainful Miss Mabel condescending to be deucedly fond of any one—but so they tell me. And I say, Holroyd, to come back to one point, is there any reason why you should stay in town?'

'None,' said Holroyd, with pain ringing in his voice, 'none in the world why I should stay anywhere now.'

'Well, won't you come with me? I start the first thing to-morrow—it will do you good.'

'It's kind of you to ask,' said Vincent, 'but I can't desert Ashburn in that way after he took the trouble to come down and meet me; we've not seen one another for so long—have we, Mark?'

Caffyn smiled in spite of himself.

'Why, didn't he tell you?" he said; 'he's arranged to go abroad himself in a day or two.'

Vincent glanced round at Mark, who stood there the personification of embarrassment and shame.

'I see,' he said, with a change in his voice, 'I shall only be in the way here, then.' Mark said nothing—he could not. 'Well, Caffyn, I'll come with you;

the Lakes will do as well as any other place for the short time I shall be in England.'

'Then you haven't come home for good?' inquired Caffyn.

'For good? no—not exactly,' he replied bitterly; 'plantation life has unsettled me, you see. I shall have to go back to it.'

'To Ceylon!' cried Mark, with hopes that had grown quite suddenly. Was it, could it be, possible that the threatened storm was going to pass away—not for a time, but altogether?

'Anywhere!' said Holroyd; 'what does it matter?'

'There's a man I know,' observed Caffyn, 'who's going out to a coffee estate somewhere in Southern India, the Annamalli Hills, I think he said; he was wanting some one with a little experience to go out with him the other day. He's a rattling good fellow too—Gilroy, his name is. I don't know if you'd care to meet him. You might think it good enough to join him, at all events for a trial.'

'Yes,' said Holroyd, listlessly, 'I may as well see him.'

'Well,' said Caffyn, 'he's at Liverpool just now, I believe. I can write to him and tell him about you, and ask him to come over and meet us somewhere, and then you could settle all about it, you know, if you liked the look of him.'

'It's very good of you to take all this trouble,' said Vincent gratefully.

'Bosh!' said Caffyn, using that modern form for polite repudiation of gratitude —'no trouble at all; looks rather as if I wanted to get rid of you, don't you know—Gilroy's going out so very soon.'

'Is he?' said Vincent. He had no suspicions. Mabel's engagement seemed only too probable, and he knew that he had never had any claim upon her; but for all that, he had no intention of taking the fact entirely upon trust; he would not leave England till he had seen her and learned from her own lips that he must give up hope for ever; after that the sooner he went the better.

'You needn't go out with him unless you want to—you might join him later there; but of course you wouldn't take anything for granted. Still, if you *did* care to go out at once, I suppose you've nothing in the way of preparations to hinder you, eh?'

'No,' said Vincent; 'it would only be transferring my trunks from one ship to another; but I—I don't feel well enough to go out just yet.'

'Of course not,' said Caffyn; 'you must have a week or two of mountain air first, then you'll be ready to go anywhere; but I must have you at Wastwater,' he added, with a laughing look of intelligence at Mark, whose soul rose against all this duplicity—and subsided again.

How wonderfully everything was working out! Unless some fatality interposed between then and the next morning, the man he dreaded would be safely buried in the wildest part of the Lake District—he might even go off to India again and never learn the wrong he had suffered! At all events, Mark was saved for a time. He was thankful, deeply thankful now, that he had resisted that mad impulse to confession.

Vincent had dropped into an armchair with his back to the window, brooding over his shattered ambitions. All his proud self-confidence in his ability to win fame for the woman he loved was gone now; he felt that he had neither the strength nor the motive to try again. If—if this he had heard was true, he must be an exile, with lower aims and a blanker life than those he had once hoped for.

All at once Mark, as he stood at the window with Caffyn, stepped back with a look of helpless terror.

'What the deuce is it now?' said the other under his breath.

Mark caught Caffyn's elbow with a fierce grip. A carriage had driven up; they could see it plainly still in the afternoon light, which had only just begun to fade.

'Do you see?' muttered Mark thickly. 'She's in it; she looked up—and saw *me!*'

Caffyn himself was evidently disturbed.

'Not, not Mabel?' he whispered. 'Worse! it's Dolly—and *she'll* come up. She'll see *him!*'

The two stood there staring blankly at each other, while Holroyd was still too absorbed to have the least suspicion that the future happiness or misery of himself and others was trembling just then in the balance.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE WAY OF TRANSGRESSORS.

Dolly's mere appearance in the room would lead Vincent to suspect that he had been deceived; her first words would almost inevitably expose the fraud. She

was coming up, nevertheless, and Mark felt powerless to prevent her—he could only indulge himself in inwardly cursing Caffyn's ingenuity and his own weakness for having brought him to such a pass as this. Caffyn was shaken for the moment, but he soon recovered himself.

'Keep cool, will you?' he whispered (he might have shouted, for Vincent saw and heard nothing just then): 'you stay here and keep *him* amused—don't let him go near the window!' Then he added aloud, 'I'll go and see if I can find that Bradshaw. Almost certain I didn't bring it with me; but if you saw it there, why'—and he was gone.

Mark caught up a paper with a rapid, 'Oh! I say, Vincent, *did* you see this correspondence about competitive examinations? Of course you haven't, though—just listen then, it's rather amusing!' and he began to read with desperate animation a string of letters on a subject which, in the absence of worthier sport, was just then being trailed before the public. The newspaper hid his face, and while he read he could strain his ears for the first sign of Dolly's approach. She had seen him, he was sure, and she would insist upon coming up—she was so fond of him! He wished now he had gone down himself, instead of leaving it to Caffyn.

Meanwhile the latter had rushed down in time to wave back the maid who was coming to the door, and which he opened himself. Dolly was standing there alone on the doorsteps. She had prepared a polite little formula for the servant, and was therefore disappointed to see Caffyn.

'Why, it's *you!*' she said, in rather an injured tone.

'You never expected such luck as that, did you?' said Caffyn. 'Is there anything I can do for your ladyship?'

'Mabel asked me to drive round this way and ask if Mark has come back. There's Fräulein in the carriage too, but I wanted to ask all by myself.'

'Pray step this way,' said Caffyn, leading the way with mock politeness to a little sitting-room on the ground-floor.

'I can't stay long,' said Dolly. 'Mark isn't here—I saw his face at the window upstairs. Mabel told me to see if he was quite well, and I want to ask him how he is and where he's been.'

'Afraid you can't see him just now,' said Caffyn, 'he's go; some one with him he hasn't seen for a long time—we mustn't disturb him; tell Mabel he'll come to-morrow an he's quite well.'

Dolly was preparing to go, when she discovered some portmanteaus and boxes in a corner.

'What a funny box, with all those red tickets on it!' she said. 'Oh, and a big white helmet—it's green inside. Is Mark going to be married in *that* thing, Harold?'—all at once she stopped short in her examination. 'Why—why, they've got poor Vincent's name on them! they *have*—look!' And Caffyn realised that he had been too ingenious: he had forgotten all about this luggage in showing Dolly to that room, in his fear lest her voice should be too audible in the passage.

'There, there—you're keeping Fräulein waiting all this time. Never mind about the luggage,' he said hurriedly, 'Good-bye, Dolly; sorry you can't stop.'

'But I *can* stop,' objected Dolly, who was not easily got rid of at the best of times. 'Harold, I'm sure that dear Vincent has come alive again—*he's* the somebody Mark hasn't seen for a long time. . . . Oh, if it really *is* . . . I must go and see!'

Caffyn saw his best course now was the hazardous one of telling the truth.

'Well,' he said, 'as it happens, you're right. Vincent was *not* drowned, and he is here—but I don't advise you to go to see him, for all that.'

'Why?' said Dolly, with her joy suddenly checked—she scarcely knew why.

'He's in a fearful rage with you just now,' said Caffyn; 'he's found out about that letter—that letter you burnt.'

'Mabel said I was never to worry about that horrid letter any more—and I'm not going to—so it's no use your trying to make me,' said Dolly defiantly. And then, as her fears grew, she added, 'What about that letter?'

'Well,' said Caffyn, 'it appears that the letter you tore the stamp off was from Vincent (it had a foreign stamp, I remember), and it was very important. He never got an answer, and he found out somehow that it was because you burnt it—and then—my goodness, Dolly, what a rage he was in!'

'I don't care,' said Dolly. 'Mabel will tell Vincent how it was—*she* knows.'

'Ah, but you see she *don't* know,' said Caffyn. 'Do you suppose if she had known who the letter was from and what it was about she would have taken it so quietly? Why, she thinks it was only an old envelope you burnt—I heard her say so—you know she still believes Vincent is dead. She doesn't know the truth yet, but Vincent will tell her. Are you coming up to see him?'

'No,' said Dolly, trembling; 'I—I think I won't—not to-day.'

'Wise child!' said Caffyn, approvingly. 'Between ourselves, Dolly, poor Vincent has come back in such a queer state that he's not fit to see anyone just yet, and we're dreadfully afraid of his meeting Mabel and frightening her.'

'Oh, don't let him come—don't!' cried terrified Dolly.

'Well, I tell you what we've done—I got Mark to agree to it—we haven't told him that you're any of you at home at all; he thinks you're all away, and he's coming with me into the country to-morrow; so, unless you tell Mabel you've seen him——'

'Oh, but I won't; I don't *want* her to know—not now,' said Dolly. 'Oh, and I was so glad when I first heard of it! Is he—is he *very* angry, Harold?'

'I don't advise you to come near him just yet,' he said. 'You won't tell Fräulein, of course? I'll see you to the carriage . . . how do, Fräulein? Home, I suppose?' And the last thing he saw was Dolly's frightened glance up at the window as the carriage drove off. 'She won't tell *this* time,' he said to himself.

And indeed poor Dolly was silent enough all the way home, and met Fräulein Moser's placid stream of talk with short and absent answers. That evening, however, in the schoolroom, she roused herself to express a sudden interest in Colin's stamp album, which she coaxed him to show her.

As he was turning over the pages, one by one, she stopped him suddenly. 'What is that one?' she said, pointing out a green-coloured stamp amongst the colonial varieties.

'Can't you read?' said Colin, a little contemptuously, even while regarding this healthy interest as a decided sign of grace in a girl: 'there's Ceylon Postage" on the top, isn't there? It isn't rare, though—twenty-four cents—I gave twopence for it; but I've had much more expensive ones, only I swopped them. If you *want* to see a rare one, here's a Virgin Islands down here——"

'I think I'll see the rest another time, Colin, thanks,' said Dolly; 'I'm tired now.'

'I mayn't have time to show you another day,' said Colin, 'so you'd better ——' But Dolly had gone—her passion for information having flickered out as suddenly as it rose. She knew that English-looking green stamp well enough; there had been dreadful days once when it had seemed always floating before her eyes, the thing which might send her to prison; she was much older now, of course, and knew better; but, for all that, it had not quite lost its power to plague her yet.

For, this time at least, she was sure that Harold had not been teasing; she *had* burnt the letter, and it came from Ceylon; Vincent must have written it, and he had come back and meant to scold her—she had cried so when she heard he was drowned, and now she was afraid to see him—a shadow she dared not speak of had once more fallen across her life!

Caffyn came up with a Bradshaw in his hand. 'Had a hunt after it, I can tell you,' he said; 'and then your old landlady and I had a little chat—I couldn't get away from her. Aren't you fellows ready for some dinner?' And the relief with which Mark had seen the carriage roll away below had really given him something of an appetite.

Before dinner, however, Mark took Caffyn up into his bedroom under the pretence of washing his hands, but with the real object of preventing a hideous possibility which—for his fears quickened his foresight—had just occurred to him.

'If you don't mind,' he began awkwardly, 'I—I'd rather you didn't mention that I had written—I mean, that you didn't say anything about "Illusion," you know.'

Caffyn's face remained unchanged. 'Certainly, if you wish it,' he said; 'but why? Is this more of your modesty?'

'No,' said Mark, weakly, 'no; not exactly modesty; but, the fact is, I find that Holroyd has been going in for the same sort of thing himself, and—and not successfully; and so I shouldn't like to ——'

'Quite so,' agreed Caffyn. 'Now, really, that's very nice and considerate of you to think of that, Ashburn. I like to see that sort of thing in a fellow, you know; shows he isn't spoilt by success! Well, you can rely on me—I won't breathe a word to suggest your being in any way connected with pen and ink.'

'Thanks,' said Mark, gratefully: 'I know you won't,' and they went down.

Mark could not but feel degraded in his own eyes by all this hypocrisy; but it was so necessary, and was answering its purpose so well, that his mental suffering was less than might have been expected.

At dinner he felt himself able, now that his fears were removed, to encour-

age conversation, and drew from Holroyd particulars of his Ceylon life, which supplied them with topics for that evening, and prevented the meal from becoming absolutely dull, even though it was at no time remarkable for festivity.

'I tell you what I can't quite understand,' said Caffyn on one occasion. 'Why did you let us all go on believing that you were drowned on the "Mangalore" when a letter or two would have put it all right?'

'I did write one letter home,' said Holroyd, with a faint red tinging his brown cheeks. 'I might have written to Mark, I know; but I waited to hear from him first, and then one thing after another prevented me. It was only when I sent down to Colombo, months afterwards, for my heavy baggage, that I heard what had happened to the ship.'

'Well,' observed Caffyn, 'you might have written then.'

'I know that,' said Holroyd: 'the fact is, though, that I never thought it possible, after going off the ship, as I did at Bombay, that I could be reported amongst the missing. As soon as I discovered that that was so, I wrote. No doubt I ought to have written before; still, when you have a large estate on your hands, and you feel your health gradually going, and failure coming closer and closer, you don't feel a strong inclination for correspondence.'

He fell back into a moody silence again. Perhaps, after all, his silence had arisen from other causes still; perhaps, as his health declined, he had come to find a morbid satisfaction in the idea that he was alone—forgotten by those he cared for—until his very isolation had become dear to him. He had been a fool--he knew that now—his two friends had mourned him sincerely, and would have been overjoyed to hear that he was alive. He had wronged them—what if he had wronged Mabel too? Another had won her, but had not his own false delicacy and perverted pride caused him to miss the happiness he hungered for? 'At all events,' he thought, 'I won't whine about it. Before I go out again I will know the worst. If the other man is a good fellow, and will make her happy, I can bear it.' But deep down in his heart a spark of hope glimmered still.

'Well, I must be going,' said Caffyn, breaking in on his reverie. 'I've got to pack before I go to bed. Look here, Vincent' (and he consulted the Bradshaw as he spoke), 'there's a train at ten in the morning, from Euston; gets in to Drigg late at night; we can sleep there, and drive over to Wastwater next day. Will that do you?'

'It's rather sudden,' said Holroyd, hesitating.

'Oh, come, old fellow, you're not going to back out of it now. I've stayed over a day on the chance of bringing you; you promised to come just now; there's nothing to keep you, and I've set my heart on having you.'

'Then I'll come,' said Holroyd. 'We'll meet on the platform to-morrow.'

Mark breathed more freely again. He accompanied Caffyn down to the front door, and then, as they stood for a moment in the little passage dimly lighted by a feeble kerosene lamp on a bracket, each looked at the other strangely.

'Well,' said Caffyn, with a light laugh, 'I hope you are satisfied; he'll be well out of the way for at least a fortnight, and, if this Gilroy business comes off, he may be taken off your hands altogether before you come back.'

'I know,' said Mark, 'you've been awfully kind about it; the—the only thing I can't understand is, *why* you're taking all this trouble.' For this was beginning to exercise his mind at last.

'Oh,' said Caffyn, 'is *that* it? Well, I don't mind telling you—I like you, my boy, and if anything I can do will save you a little worry and give me a companion in my loneliness into the bargain (mind, I don't say that hasn't something to do with it), why, I'm delighed to do it. But if you'd rather see some more of him before he goes out again, there's no hurry. Gilroy will wait, and I won't say any more about it.'

'It—it seems a good opening,' said Mark hastily, not without shame at himself; 'perhaps the sooner it is arranged the better, don't you think?'

Caffyn laughed again. 'You old humbug!' he said. 'Why don't you tell the truth? You found out he's a defeated rival, and you don't care about having him sitting sighing on the door-step of that little house in—where is it?—on Campden Hill! Well, don't be alarmed: I think he'll go, and I promise you I won't try to prevent him if he's keen on it.'

He laughed aloud once or twice as he walked home. Mark's tender solicitude for his friend's future tickled his sense of humour. 'And the funniest thing about it is,' he thought, 'that I'm going to help the humbug!'

Mark was up early the next morning, and hurried Holroyd over his breakfast as much as he dared. He had a ghastly fear of missing the train, in consequence of which they arrived at Euston at least half an hour before the time of starting. Caffyn was not on the platform, and Mark began to dread his being too late. 'And then,' he thought with a shudder, 'I shall have him on my hands for another whole day. Another day of this would drive me mad! And I *must* see Mabel this morning.'

The luggage had been duly labelled, and there was nothing to do but to wander up and down the platform, Mark feeling oppressed by a sinking premonition of disaster whenever he loosed his hold of Holroyd's arm for a moment. He was waiting while the latter bought a paper at the bookstall, when suddenly he felt himself slapped heavily on the back by some one behind him, and heard a voice at whose well-known accents he very nearly fell down with horror. It was his terrible uncle!

''Ullo, you know, this won't do, young fellow; what's all this?' he began, too evidently bursting with the badinage which every Benedick must endure. 'Why, you ain't going for your honeymoon before the wedding—that's suspicious-lookin', that is!'

'No, no, it's all right,' said Mark, trembling; 'how do you do, uncle? I—I'd rather you didn't talk about—about that here—not quite so loud!'

'Well, I don't know what there is in that to be ashamed of,' said his uncle; 'and if I mayn't be allowed to talk about a wedding—which but for me, mind yer, would 'a' been long enough in coming about—p'raps you'll tell me who is; and, as to talking loud, I'm not aware that I'm any louder than usual. What are you looking like that for? Hang me if I don't think there's something in this I ought to see to!' he broke out, with a sudden change of face, as his shrewd little eyes fell on Holroyd's rug, which Mark was carrying for the moment. 'Mark, for all your cleverness, you're a slippery feller—I always felt that about you. You're up to something now—you're meaning to play a trick on one that trusts you, and I won't have it—do you hear me?—I tell you I won't have it!'

'What do you mean?' faltered Mark. For the instant he thought himself detected, and did not pause to think how improbable this was.

'*You* know what I mean. I'm not going to stand by and see you ruin yourself. You sha'n't set a foot in the train, if I have to knock you down and set on you myself! If' (and his voice shook here)—'if you've got into any mess—and it's money—I'll clear you this time, whatever it costs me, but you sha'n't run away from that dear girl that you're promised to. I'm d——d if you do!'

Mark laughed naturally and easily enough.

'Did you think I was going to run away, then—from *Mabel?*'

'You tell me what you're doing 'ere at this time o' day, then,' said his uncle, only partially reassured. 'What's that you're carrying?'

'This? My friend's rug. I'm seeing a friend off—that's all. If you do not believe me, I'll show you the friend.' As he looked back at the bookstall he saw something which stiffened him once more with helpless horror: the man at the stall was trying to persuade Holroyd to buy a book for the journey—he was just dusting one now, a volume in a greenish cover with bold crimson lettering, before recommending it; and the book was a copy of the latest edition of 'Illusion,' the edition which bore Mark's name on the title-page! In his despair Mark did the very last thing he would otherwise have done—he rushed up to Holroyd and caught his arm. 'I say, old fellow, don't let them talk you into buying any of that rubbish. Look here, I—I want to introduce you to my uncle!'

'I wasn't asking the gentleman to buy no rubbish,' said the man at the bookstall, resenting the imputation. 'This is a book which is 'aving a large sale just now: we've sold as many as'—but here Mark succeeded in getting Vincent away and bringing him up to Mr. Lightowler.

'How are you, sir?' began that gentleman, with a touch of condescension in his manner. 'So it's only you that's goin' off? Well, that's a relief to my mind, I can tell yer; for when I saw Mark here with that rug, I somehow got it into my mind that *he* was goin' to make a run for it. And there 'ud be a pretty thing for all parties—hey?'

'Your nephew very kindly came to see me off, that's all,' said Holroyd.

'Oh,' said Uncle Solomon, with a tolerant wave of his hand, 'I don't object to that, yer know, I've no objections to that—not that I don't think (between ourselves, mind yer) that he mightn't p'raps be better employed just now;' and here, to Mark's horror, he

winked with much humorous suggestiveness at both of them.

'That is very likely,' said Holroyd.

'What I mean by saying he might be "better employed,"' continued Uncle Solomon, 'is that when——'

'Yes, yes, uncle,' Mark hastened to interpose, 'but on special occasions like these one can leave one's duties for a while.'

'Now there I think you make your mistake—you make too sure, Mark. I tell you (and I think your friend 'ere will bear me out in this) that, in your situation, it don't *do* to go leaving 'em in the lurch too often—it don't *do*!'

Mark could stand no more of this.

'A *lurch* now,' he said—'what an odd expression that is! Do you know, I've often tried to picture to myself what kind of a thing a lurch may be. I always fancy it must be a sort of a deep hole. Have *you* any idea, Vincent?'

Mark would have been too thankful to have been able to drop his uncle down a lurch of that description occasionally, particularly when he chose, as he did on this occasion, to take offence at his nephew's levity.

'Lurch is a good old English word, let me tell yer, Mr. Schoolmaster that was,' he broke in; 'and if I'd done as many a man in my position would, and left *you* in the lurch a few months ago, where would you ha' been?—that's what I'd like to know! For I must tell yer, Mr. Holroyd, that that feller came to me with a precious long face, and says he, "Uncle," he says, "I want you to——"'

Mark felt that in another moment the whole story of his uncle's intervention at Kensington Park Gardens would burst upon Holroyd with the force of a revelation, and he was at the end of his resources. *Where* was Caffyn all this time? How could he be so careless as to be late?

'I—I don't think it's quite fair to tell all that,' he expostulated weakly.

'Fair!' said Uncle Solomon. 'I made no secrecy over it. I did nothing to be ashamed of and hush up, and it's no disgrace to you that I can see to be helped by an uncle that can afford it. Well, as I was saying, Mark came to me——'

Here a small Juggernaut car in the shape of a high-piled truck came rolling down on them with a shout of, 'By your leave there, by your leave!' from the unseen porter behind. Mark drew Vincent sharply aside, and then saw Caffyn coming quickly towards them through the crowd, and forgot the torpedo his uncle was doing his best to launch: he felt that with Caffyn came safety. Caffyn, who had evidently been hurrying, gave a sharp glance at the clock: 'Sorry to be late,' he said, as he shook hands. 'Binney fetched me a hansom with a wobbling old animal in it that ran down like a top when we'd got half-way; and of course the main road was up for the last mile—however, I've just done it. Come along, Holroyd, I've got a carriage.' And the three men went off together, leaving Mr. Lightowler behind in a decidedly huffy frame of mind.

'Good-bye, Mark,' said Vincent affectionately before he got in. 'We've not had time to see much of one another, have we? I can't say how glad I am, though, even to have had that. I shall try not to leave England without seeing you once more; but, if we don't meet again, then good-bye and God bless you, old boy! Write to me from abroad, and tell me where you are. We mustn't lose touch of one another again—eh?'

'Good-bye,' said Caffyn, in a hurried voice before he followed. 'I've got your Swiss address, haven't I? and if—if anything happens, you shall hear from me.'

The next minute Mark stood back, and as the long line of chocolate-and-white carriages rolled gently past he caught his last sight of Vincent's face, with the look on it that he could not hope to see again. He saw Caffyn too, who gave him a cool side-jerk of the head at parting, with a smile which, when Mark recollected it later, seemed to account for some of the uneasiness he felt. But, after all, this desperate plan had prospered, thanks to Caffyn's unconscious assistance. If Vincent had been gagged and bound and kept in a dungeon cell till the wedding was over, he could hardly be more harmless than he would be at Wastwater. Two more days—only two more—and the calamity he dreaded even more than exposure would be averted for ever—none but he would call Mabel Langton his wife! Thinking this as he left the platform, he ran up against his uncle, whom he had completely forgotten: he was harmless now as a safety match bereft of its box, and Mark need fear him no longer.

'Why, there you are, uncle—eh?' he said, with much innocent satisfaction. 'I couldn't think where you'd got to.'

'Oh, I dessay,' growled Mr. Lightowler, 'and your friend nearly lost the

train lookin' for me, didn't he? I'm not to be got over by soft speakin', Mark, and I'm sharp enough to see where I'm not wanted. I must say, though, that that feller, if he's one of your friends, might a' shown me a little more common respect, knowing 'oo I was, instead o' bolting away while I was talkin' to him, for all the world as if he wanted to get rid of me.'

Mark saw that his uncle was seriously annoyed, and hastened to soothe his ruffled dignity—a task which was by no means easy.

'It isn't as if I needed to talk to him either,' he persisted. 'I've a friend of my own to see off, that's why I'm here at this time (Liverpool *he's* goin' to),' he added, with some obscure sense of superiority implied in this fact; 'and let me tell you, he's a man that's looked up to by everyone there, is Budkin, and 'll be mayor before he dies! And another thing let me say to you, Mark. In the course of my life I've picked up, here and there, some slight knowledge of human character, and I read faces as easy as print. Now I don't like the look of that friend of yours.'

'Do you mean Caffyn?' asked Mark.

'I don't know *him;* no, I mean that down-lookin 'chap you introduced to me —'Olroyd, isn't it? Well, don't you have too much to do with him—there's something in his eye I don't fancy; he ain't to be trusted, and you mind what I say.'

'Well,' said Mark, 'I can promise you that I shall see no more of him than I can help in future, if that's any relief to your mind.'

'You stick to that then, and—'ullo, there *is* Budkin come at last! You come along with me and I'll introduce you (he's not what you call a refined sort of feller, yer know,' he explained forbearingly, 'but still we've always been friends in a way); you can't stop? Must go back to Miss Mabel, hey? Well, well, I won't keep yer; good-bye till the day after to-morrow then, and don't you forgit what you'd 'a been if you'd been thrown on the world without an uncle—there'd be no pretty Miss Mabel for you then, whatever you may think about it, young chap!'

When Mark made his appearance at Kensington Park Gardens again, Dolly watched his face anxiously, longing to ask if Vincent had really gone at last, but somehow she was afraid. And so, as the time went by, and no Vincent Holroyd came to the door to denounce her, she took comfort, and never knew how her fears were shared by her new brother-in-law.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AGAG.

At a certain point between Basle and Schaffhausen, the Rhine, after winding in wide curves through low green meadows fringed with poplars, suddenly finds itself contracted to a narrow and precipitous channel, down which it foams with a continuous musical roar. On the rocks forming this channel, connected by a quaint old bridge, stand the twin towns, Gross and Klein Laufenburg. Of the two there can be no question which has the superior dignity, for, while Klein Laufenburg (which belongs to Baden) is all comprised in a single narrow street ending in a massive gatehouse, Gross Laufenburg, which stands in Swiss territory, boasts at least two streets and a half, besides the advantages of a public platz that can scarcely be smaller than an average London back garden, a church with a handsome cupola and blue and gold faced clock, and the ruins of what was once an Austrian stronghold crowning the hill around which the roofs are clustered, with a withered tree on the ragged top of its solitary tall grey tower. Gross Laufenburg has seen more stirring times than at present; it was a thriving post town once, a halting-place for all the diligences. Napoleon passed through it, too, on his way to Moscow, and on the roofs of an old tower outside the gate is still to be seen a grotesque metal profile, riddled with the bullets of French conscripts, who made a target of it in sport or insult, when a halt was called. Now the place is sleepy and quiet enough: there are no diligences to rattle and lumber over the stones, and the most warlike spectacle there is provided by the Swiss militiamen as they march in periodically from the neighbouring villages to have their arms inspected, singing choruses all the way. There is a railway, it is true, on the Klein Laufenburg bank, but a railway where the little station and mouth of the tunnel have been so ornamentally treated that at a slight distance a train coming in irresistibly suggests one of those working models set in motion by either a dropped penny or the fraudulent

action of the human breath, as conscience permits. So innocent an affair is powerless to corrupt Laufenburg, and has brought as yet but few foreigners to its gates. English, Russian, and American tourists may perhaps exclaim admiringly as the trains stop, affording a momentary view of the little town grouped compactly on the rocks with the blue-green cataract rushing by—but they are bound for Schaffhausen or the Black Forest or Constance, and cannot break the journey—so the hosts of personally conducted ones pass Laufenburg by, and Laufenburg seems upon the whole resigned to its obscurity. But Mark Ashburn, at least, had felt its gentle attractions, having come upon it almost by accident, as he returned alone from the Black Forest after the tour with Caffyn. His thoughts were constantly of Mabel Langton at that time, and he found a dreamy pleasure in the idea of coming to Laufenburg some day when she should be his companion, which made him look upon everything he saw merely as a background for her fair face. It had seemed a very hopeless dream then, and yet a few months more and the dream had come to pass. He was at Laufenburg once again, and Mabel was by his side.

The long nightmare of those days before the wedding was over at last. He had not dared to feel secure, even in the church, so strong was his presentiment of evil. But nothing had happened, the words were spoken which made Mabel his own, and neither man nor angel intervened. And now a week had gone by, during which nothing from without had threatened his happiness; and for a time, as he resolutely shut his eyes to all but the present, he had been supremely happy. Then by degrees the fox revived and began to gnaw once more. His soul sickened as he remembered in what a Fool's Paradise he was living. Unless Holroyd decided to leave England at once with this young Gilroy of whom Caffyn had spoken—a stranger—he would certainly learn how he had been tricked with regard to Mabel's marriage, and this would lead him on to the full discovery of his wrongs. In his mad determination to win her at all costs, Mark had disregarded everything but the immediate future. If shame and misery were to come upon him, he had told himself, he would at least have the memory of a period of perfect bliss to console him—he might lose all else, but Mabel could not be taken from him. But now, as she took no pains to hide the content which filled her heart, he would scarcely bear to meet her sweet grey eyes for the thought that soon the love he read in them would change to aversion and cold contempt, and each dainty caress was charged for him with a ferocious irony. He knew at last his miserable selfishness in having linked her lot with his, and there were times when in his torture he longed for courage to tell her all, and put an end with his own hand to a happiness which was to him the bitterest of delusions. But he dared not; he had had such marvellous escapes already that he clung to the hope that some miracle might save him yet.

And this was Mark's condition on the morning when this chapter finds him. There is a certain retreat which the town would seem to have provided for the express benefit of lovers—a rustic arbour on a little mount near the railway station overlooking the Rhine Fall. The surly red-bearded signalman who watched over the striped barrier at the level crossing by the tunnel had understood the case from the first, and (not altogether from disinterested motives, perhaps) would hasten to the station as soon as he saw the young couple crossing the bridge and fetch the key of the little wooden gate which kept off all unlicensed intruders.

It was on this mount that Mark stood now with Mabel by his side, looking down on the scene below. Spring had only just set in, and the stunted acacia trees along the road to the bridge were still bare, and had the appearance of distorted candelabra; the poplars showed only the mistiest green as yet, the elms were leafless, and the horse-chestnuts had not unfolded a single one of their crumpled claws. But the day was warm and bright, the sky a faint blue, with a few pinkish-white clouds shaded with dove colour near the horizon; pigeons were fluttering round the lichened piers of the old bridge, which cast a broad band of purple on the bright green water, and the cuckoo was calling incessantly from the distant woods. Opposite were the tall houses, tinted in faint pink and grey and cream colour, with their crazy wooden balconies overhanging the rocks, and above the high-pitched brown roofs rose the church and the square tree-crowned ruin, behind which was a background of pine-covered hills, where the snow still lay amongst the trunks in a silver graining on the dark red soil. Such life as the little

place could boast was in full stir; every now and then an ox-cart or a little hooded gig would pass along the bridge, and townsmen in brown straw hats would meet half-way with elaborate salutations and linger long to gossip, and bare-headed girls with long plaited pigtails present their baskets and bundles to be peered into or prodded suspiciously by the customs officer stationed at the Baden frontier-post, striped in brilliant crimson and yellow, like a giant sugarstick. Over on the little Laufenplatz children were playing about amongst the big iron salmon cages, and old people were sitting in the sunshine on the seats by the fountain, where from time to time a woman would fill her shining tin pails, or a man come to rinse out a tall wooden funnel before strapping it on his back. Down on the rocks below, in a little green cradle swinging over the torrent, sat a man busy with his pipe and newspaper, which he occasionally left to haul up and examine the big salmon nets by the aid of the complicated rigging of masts and yards at his side.

'How charming it all is!' said Mabel, turning her bright face to Mark. 'I am so glad we didn't let ourselves be talked into going anywhere else. Mother thought we were mad to come here so early in the year. I think she fancied it was somewhere in the heart of the Alps, though, and I never expected anything like this myself.'

'How would you like to stay out here more than a month, Mabel—all the summer, perhaps? he asked.

'It would be delightful, for some things,' she said, 'but I think I shall be willing to go back when the end of the month comes, Mark; we *must*, you know; our house will be ready for us, and then there is your work waiting for you, you know you would never write a line here, you are so disgracefully idle!'

'I—I was only joking,' he said (although his expression was far from jocular); 'we will enjoy all this while we can, and when—when the end comes we can remember how happy we were!'

'When the end of this comes we shall only be beginning to be very happy in another way at home in our own pretty house, Mark. I'm not in the least afraid of the future. Are you?'

He drew her slight form towards him and pressed her to his heart with a fervour in which there was despair as well as love.

'Do you think I could be afraid of any future, so long as you were part of it, darling?' he said. 'It is only the fear of losing you that comes over me sometimes!'

'You silly boy!' said Mabel, looking up at his overcast face with a little tender laugh. 'I never knew you could be so sentimental. I am quite well, and I don't mean to die as long as you want me to take care of you!'

He dreaded to lose her by a parting far bitterer than death; but he had said too much already, and only smiled sadly to himself at the thought of the ghastly mockery which the memory of her words now might have for him in a day or two. She was daintily rearranging the violets in his buttonhole, and he caught the slender white hands in his, and, lifting them to his lips, kissed them with a passionate humility. A little while, perhaps, and those dear hands would never again thrill warm in his grasp as he felt them now!

'I'm afraid,' said Mabel a little later, 'you're letting yourself be worried still by something. Is it the new book? Are you getting impatient to hear about it?'

'I did expect some letters before this,' replied Mark (he was indeed fast growing desperate at Caffyn's silence); 'but I dare say everything is going on well.'

'The train from Basle came in just as we got here,' said Mabel. 'See, there is the postman crossing the bridge now; I'm getting anxious too, Mark; I can't think why I have had no letters from home lately. I hope it is nothing to do with Dolly. She was looking quite ill when we went away, almost as she did—oh, Mark, if I thought Harold had dared to frighten her again!'

Mark remembered that afternoon in South Audley Street. He had never sought to know why Dolly had gone away so obediently, but now he felt a new uneasiness; he had never meant her to be frightened; he would see into it if he ever came home again.

'I don't think he would do such a thing now,' he said, and tried to believe so himself. 'I always thought, you know, Mabel, you were rather hard on him about that affair.'

'I can never change my mind about it,' said Mabel.

'When you are angry, do you never forgive?' asked Mark.

'I could never forgive treachery,' she said. 'Dolly believed every word he said, and he knew it, and played on her trust in him for some horrible pleasure

I suppose he found in it. No, I can never forgive him for that, Mark, never!'

He turned away with a spasm of conscience. If Caffyn had been a traitor, what was he?

He was roused from a gloomy reverie by Mabel's light touch on his arm.

'Look, Mark,' she cried, 'there is something you wanted to see—there's a timber raft coming down the river.'

For within the last few days the Rhine had risen sufficiently to make it possible to send the timber down the stream, instead of by the long and costly transport overland, and as she spoke the compact mass of pine trunks lashed together came slowly round the bend of the river, gradually increasing in pace until it shot the arch of the bridge and plunged through the boiling white rapids, while the raft broke up with a dull thunder followed by sharp reports as the more slender trunks snapped with the strain.

Mark looked on with a sombre fascination, as if the raft typified his life's happiness, till it was all over, and some of the trunks, carried by a cross current into a little creek, had been pulled in to the shore with long hooks, and the rest had floated on again in placid procession, their scraped wet edges gleaming in the sunlight.

As he turned towards the town again, he saw the porter of their hotel crossing the bridge, with the director's little son, a sturdy flaxen-haired boy of about four, running by his side. They passed through the covered part of the bridge and were hidden for an instant, and then turned up the road towards the station.

'They are coming this way,' said Mabel. 'I do believe little Max is bringing me a letter, the darling! I'll run down to the gate and give him a kiss for it.'

For the child's stolid shyness had soon given way to Mabel's advances, and now he would run along the hotel corridors after her like a little dog, and his greatest delight was to be allowed to take her letters to her. They were close to the mount now, the porter in his green baize apron and official flat cap, and little Max in his speckled blue blouse, trotting along to keep up, and waving the envelope he held in his brown fist. Mark could see from where he stood that it was not a letter that the child was carrying.

'It's a telegram, Mabel,' he said, disturbed, though there was no particular cause as yet for being so.

Mabel instantly concluded the worst. 'I knew it,' she said, and the colour left her cheeks, and she caught at the rough wooden rail for support. 'Dolly is ill . . . go down and see what it is. . . . I'm afraid!'

Mark ran down to the gate, and took the telegram away from little Max, whose mouth trembled piteously at not being allowed to deliver it in person to the pretty English lady, and—scarcely waiting to hear the porter's explanation that as he had to come up to the station he had brought the message with him, knowing that he would probably find the English couple in their favourite retreat—he tore open the envelope as he went up the winding path. The first thing he looked for was the sender's name: *From H. Caffyn, Pillar Hotel, Westwater*, and he dared not read further. Something very serious must have happened, since Caffyn had sent a telegram! Before he could read further Mabel came down to meet him.

'It *is* Dolly, then!' she cried as she saw Mark's face. 'Oh, let us go back at once, Mark, let us go back!'

'It's not from home,' said Mark; 'it's private; go up again, Mabel, I will come to you presently.'

Mabel turned without a word, wounded that he should have troubles which she might not share with him.

When Mark read the telegram he could scarcely believe his eyes at first. Could it really be that the miracle had happened? For the words ran, '*H. of his own accord decided to leave England without further delay. Started yesterday.*' That could only mean one thing after what Caffyn had said when they met last. Vincent had gone with Gilroy. In India he would be comparatively harmless; it would be even possible now to carry out some scheme by which the book could be restored without scandal. At last the danger was past! He crumpled up the telegram and threw it away, and then sprang up to rejoin Mabel, whose fears vanished as she met his radiant look.

'I hope I didn't frighten you, darling,' he said. 'It was a business telegram, about which I was getting anxious. I was really afraid to read it for a time; but it's all right, it's good news, Mabel. You don't know what a relief it is to me! And now what shall we do? I feel as if I couldn't stay up here any longer. Shall we go and explore the surrounding country? It won't tire you?'

Mabel was ready to agree to anything in her delight at seeing Mark his old self again, and they went up the narrow street of Klein Laufenburg, and through the gatehouse out upon the long white tree-bordered main road, from which they struck into a narrow path which led through the woods to the villages scattered here and there on the distant green slopes.

Mark felt an exquisite happiness as they walked on; the black veil which clouded the landscape was rent. Nature had abandoned her irony. As he walked through the pine-woods and saw the solemn cathedral dimness suddenly chased away as the sunbeams stole down the stately aisles, dappling the red trunks with golden patches and lighting the brilliant emeralds of the moss below, he almost felt it as intended in delicate allusion to the dissipation of his own gloom. Mabel was by his side, and he need tremble no longer at the thought of resigning the sweet companionship; he could listen while she confided her plans and hopes for the future, with no inward foreboding that a day would scatter them to the winds! His old careless gaiety came back as they sat at lunch together in the long low room of an old village inn, while Mabel herself forgot her anxiety about Dolly and caught the infection of his high spirits. They walked back through little groups of low white houses, where the air was sweet with the smell of pine and cattle, and the men were splitting firewood and women gossiping at the doors, and then across the fields, where the peasants looked up to mutter a gruffly civil '*G'n Abend*' as they turned the ox-plough at the end of the furrow. Now and then they came upon one of the large crucifixes common in the district, and stopped to examine the curious collection of painted wooden emblems grouped around the central figure, or passed a wayside shrine like a large alcove, with a woman or child kneeling before the gaudily coloured images, but not too absorbed in prayer to cast a glance in the direction of the footsteps.

The sun had set when they reached the old gatehouse again, and saw through its archway the narrow little street with its irregular outlines in bold relief against a pale-green evening sky.

'I haven't tired you, have I?' said Mark, as they drew near the striped frontier-post at the entrance to the bridge.

'No, indeed,' she said; 'it has been only too delightful. Why,' she exclaimed suddenly, 'I thought we were the only English people in Laufenburg. Mark, surely that's a fellow-countryman?"

'Where?' said Mark. The light was beginning to fade a little, and at first he only saw a stout little man with important pursed lips trimming the oil-lamp which lit up the covered way over the bridge.

'Straight in front; in the angle there,' said Mabel; and even at that distance he recognised the man whose face he had hoped to see no more. His back was turned to them just then, but Mark could not mistake the figure and dress. They were Vincent Holroyd's!'

In one horrible moment the joyous security he had felt only the moment before became a distant memory. He stopped short in an agony of irresolution. What could he do? If he went on and Holroyd saw them, as he must, his first words would tell Mabel everything. Yet he must face him soon; there was no escape, no other way but across that bridge. At least, he thought, the words which ruined him should not be spoken in his hearing; he could not stand by and see Mabel's face change as the shameful truth first burst upon her mind.

His nerves were just sufficiently under his control to allow him to invent a hurried pretext for leaving her. He had forgotten to buy some tobacco in a shop they had just passed, he said; he would go back for it now, she must walk on slowly and he would overtake her directly; and so he turned and left her to meet Vincent Holroyd alone.

CHAPTER XXXII.

AT WASTWATER.

In a little private sitting-room of the rambling old whitewashed building, half farmhouse, half country inn, known to tourists as the Pillar Hotel, Wastwater, Holroyd and Caffyn were sitting one evening, nearly a week after their first arrival in the Lake district. Both were somewhat silent, but the silence was not that contented one which comes of a perfect mutual understanding, as appeared by the conscious manner in which they endeavoured to break it, now and then, without much success. By this time

indeed, each was becoming heartily tired of the other, and whatever cordiality there had been between them was fast disappearing on a closer acquaintance. During the day they kept apart by unspoken consent, as Caffyn's natural indolence was enough of itself to prevent him from being Vincent's companion in the long mountain walks by which he tried to weary out his aching sense of failure; but at night, as the hotel was empty at that season, they were necessarily thrown together, and found it a sufficient infliction.

Every day Holroyd determined that he would put an end to it as soon as he could with decency, as a nameless something in Caffyn's manner jarred on him more and more, while nothing but policy restrained Caffyn himself from provoking an open rupture. And so Holroyd was gazing absently into the fire, where the peat and ling cracked noisily as it fell into fantastic peaks and caves, and Caffyn was idly turning over the tattered leaves of a visitors' book, which bore the usual eloquent testimony to the stimulating influence of scenery upon the human intellect. When he came to the last entry, in which, while the size of the mountains was mentioned with some approval, the saltness of the hotel butter was made the subject of severe comment, he shut the book up with a yawn.

'I shall miss the life and stir of all this,' he observed, 'when I get back to town again.' Holroyd did not appear to have heard him, and, as Caffyn had intended a covert sting, the absence of all response did not improve his temper. 'I can't think why the devil they don't send me the paper,' he went on irritably. 'I ordered it to be sent down here regularly, but it never turns up by any chance. I should think even you must be getting anxious to know what's become of the world outside this happy valley?'

'I can't say I am particularly,' said Holroyd; 'I'm so used to being without papers now.'

'Ah,' said Caffyn, with the slightest of sneers, 'you've got one of those minds which can be converted into pocket kingdoms on an emergency. I haven't, you know. I'm a poor creature, and I confess I do like to know who of my friends have been the last to die, or burst up, or bolt, or marry—just now the last particularly. I wonder what's going on in the kitchen, eh?' he added, as now and then shouts and laughter came from that direction. 'Hallo, Jennie, Polly, whatever your name is,' he said to the red-cheeked waiting-maid who entered that instant, 'we didn't ring, but never mind; you just come in time to tell us the cause of these unwonted festivities—who've you got in your kitchen?'

'It's t' hoons,' said the girl.

'Hounds, is it? Jolly dogs, rather, I should say.'

'Ay, they've killed near here, and they're soopin' now. Postman's come over fra' Drigg wi' a letter—will it be for wan of ye?' and she held out an eccentrically shaped and tinted envelope; 'there's a bonny smell on it,' she observed.

'It's all right,' said Caffyn, 'it's mine; no newspapers, eh? Well, perhaps this will do as well!' and as the door closed upon the maid he tore open the letter with some eagerness. 'From the magnificent Miss Featherstone—I must say there's no stiffness about her style, though! What should *you* say when a letter begins like this—— I forgot, though,' he said, stopping himself, 'you're the kind of man who gets no love-letters to speak of.'

'None at all,' said Vincent; 'certainly not to speak of.'

'Well, it's best to keep out of that sort of thing, I dare say, if you can. Gilda tells me that she's been officiating as bridesmaid—full list of costumes and presents—"sure it will interest me," is she? Well, perhaps she's right. Do you know, Holroyd, I rather think I shall go in and see how the jovial huntsmen are getting on in there. You don't mind my leaving you?'

'Not in the least,' said Holroyd; 'I shall be very comfortable here.'

'I don't quite like leaving you in here with nothing to occupy your powerful mind, though,' and he left the room. He came back almost directly, however, with a copy of some paper in his hand: 'Just remembered it as I was shutting the door,' he said; 'it's only a stale old Review I happened to have in my portmanteau; but you may not have seen it, so I ran up and brought it down for you.'

'It's awfully good of you to think of it, really,' said Vincent, much more cordially than he had spoken of late. He had been allowing himself to dislike the other more and more, and this slight mark of thoughtfulness gave him a pang of self-reproach.

'Well, it may amuse you to run through it,' said Caffyn, 'so I got it for you.'

'Thanks,' said Holroyd, without offer-

ing to open the paper. 'I'll look at it presently.'

'Don't make a favour of it, you know,' said Caffyn; 'perhaps you prefer something heavier (you've mental resources of your own, I know); but there it is if you care to look at it.'

'I'd give anything to see him read it!' he thought when he was outside; 'but it really wouldn't be safe. I don't want him to suspect my share in the business.' So he went on to the kitchen and was almost instantly on the best of terms with the worthy farmers and innkeepers, who had been tracking the fox on foot all day across the mountains. Vincent shivered as he sat over the fire; he had overwalked himself and caught a chill trudging home in the rain that afternoon over the squelching rushy turf of Ennerdale, and now he was feeling too languid and ill to rouse himself. There was a letter that must be written to Mabel, but he felt himself unequal to attempting it just then, and was rather glad than otherwise that the hotel inkstand, containing as it did a deposit of black mud and a brace of pre-Adamite pens, decided the matter for him. He took up the Review Caffyn had so considerately provided for his entertainment and began to turn over the pages, more from a sense of obligation than anything else. For some time he could not keep his attention upon what he read.

He had dreamy lapses, in which he stood again on the mountain top he had climbed that day, and looked down on the ridges of the neighbouring ranges, which rose up all around like the curved spines of couching monsters asleep there in the solemn stillness—and then he came to himself with a start as the wind moaned along the winding passages of the inn, stealthily lifting the latch of the primitive sitting-room door, and swelling the carpet in a highly uncanny fashion.

After one of these recoveries he made some effort to fix his thoughts, and presently he found himself reading a passage which had a strangely familiar ring in it—he thought at first it was merely that passing impression of a vague sameness in things which would vanish on analysis—but, as he read on, the impression grew stronger at every line. He turned to the beginning of the article, a notice on a recent book, and read it from beginning to end with eager care. Was he dreaming still, or mad? or how was it that in this work, with a different title and by a strange writer, he seemed to recognise the creation of his own brain? He was sure of it; this book 'Illusion' was practically the same in plot and character—even in names—as the manuscript he had entrusted to Mark Ashburn, and believed a hopeless failure. If this was really his book, one of his most cherished ambitions had not failed after all; it was noticed in a spirit of warm and generous praise, the critic wrote of it as having even then obtained a marked success—could it be that life had possibilities for him beyond his wildest hopes?

The excitement of the discovery blinded Vincent just then to all matters of detail: he was too dazzled to think calmly, and only realised that he could not rest until he had found out whether he was deceiving himself or not. Obviously he could learn nothing where he was, and he resolved to go up to town immediately. He would see Mark there, if he was still in London, and from him he would probably get information on which he might act—for, as yet, it did not even occur to Vincent that his friend could have played a treacherous part. Should he confide in Caffyn before he went? Somehow he felt reluctant to do that; he thought that Caffyn would feel no interest in such things (though here, as we know, he did him an injustice), and he decided to tell no more than might seem absolutely necessary.

He rang and ordered the dog-cart to take him to Drigg next day in time to meet the morning train, and, after packing such things as he would want, lay awake for some time in a sleeplessness which was not irksome, and then lost himself in dreams of a fantastically brilliant future.

When Caffyn had had enough of the huntsmen he returned to the sitting-room, and was disgusted to find that Holroyd had retired and left the Review.

'I shall hear all about it to-morrow,' he said to himself; 'and if he knows nothing—I shall have to enlighten him myself!'

But not being an early riser at any time, he overslept himself even more than usual next day, ignoring occasional noises at his door, the consequence being that, when he came down to breakfast, it was only to find a note from Vincent on his plate: 'I find myself obliged to go to town at once on important business,' he had written. 'I tried to wake you and explain matters, but could not make you hear. I would not go off in this way

if I could help it; but I don't suppose you will very much mind.'

Caffyn felt a keen disappointment, for he had been looking forward to the pleasure of observing the way in which Vincent would take the discovery; but he consoled himself.

'After all, it doesn't matter,' he thought; 'there's only one thing that could start him off like that! What he doesn't know he'll pick up as he goes on. When he knows all, what will he do? Shouldn't wonder if he went straight for Mark. Somehow I'm rather sorry for that poor devil of a Mark—he did me a bad turn once, but I've really almost forgiven him, and—but for Mabel—I think I should have shipped dear Vincent off in perfect ignorance—dear Vincent did bore me so! But I want to be quits with charming, scornful Mabel, and, when she discovers that she's tied for life to a sham, I do think it will make her slightly uncomfortable—especially if I can tell her she's indebted to me for it all! Well, in a day or two there will be an excellent performance of the cottage-act from the "Lady of Lyons" over there, and I only wish I could have got a seat for it. She'll be magnificent. I do pity that miserable beggar, upon my soul, I do—it's some comfort to think that I never did him any harm; he lost me Mabel—and I kept him from losing her. I can tell him that if he tries any reproaches!'

Meanwhile Vincent was spinning along in the dog-cart on his way to Drigg. There had been a fall of snow during the night, and the mountains across the lake seemed grander and more awful, their rugged points showing sharp and black against the blue-tinted snow which lay in the drifts and hollows, and their peaks rising in glittering silver against a pale-blue sky. The air was keen and bracing, and his spirits rose as they drove past the grey-green lake, and through the plantations of bright young larches and sombre fir. He arrived at Drigg in good time for the London train, and, as soon as it stopped at a station of importance, seized the opportunity of procuring a copy of 'Illusion' (one of the earlier editions), which he was fortunate enough to find on the bookstall there. He began to read it at once with a painful interest, for he dreaded lest he had deluded himself in some strange way, but he had not read very far before he became convinced that this was indeed his book—his very own. Here and there, it was true, there were passages which he did not remember having written, some even so obviously foreign to the whole spirit of the book that he grew hot with anger as he read them—but for the most part each line brought back vivid recollections of the very mood and place in which it had been composed. And now he observed something which he had not noticed in first reading the Review—namely, that 'Illusion' was published by the very firm to which he had sent his own manuscript. Had not Mark given him to understand that Chilton and Fladgate had rejected it? How could he reconcile this and the story that the manuscript had afterwards been accidentally destroyed, with the fact of its publication in its present form? And why was the title changed? Who was this Cyril Ernstone, who had dared to interfere with the text? The name seemed to be one he had met before in some connection—but where? Had not Mark shown him long ago a short article of his own which had been published in some magazine over that or some very similar signature? Terrible suspicions flashed across him when these and many other similar circumstances occurred to him. He fought hard against them, however, and succeeded in dismissing them as unworthy of himself and his friend: he shrank from wronging Mark, even in thought, by believing him capable of such treachery as was implied in these doubts. He felt sure of his honour, and that he had only to meet him to receive a perfectly satisfactory explanation of his conduct in the matter, and then Mark and he would hunt down this impostor, Cyril Ernstone, together, and clear up all that was mysterious enough at present. In the meantime he would try to banish it from his mind altogether, and dwell only on the new prospects which had opened so suddenly before him; and in this he found abundant occupation for the remainder of his journey.

He reached Euston too late to do anything that night, and the next morning his first act, even before going in search of Mark, was to drive to Kensington Park Gardens with some faint hope of finding that Mabel had returned. But the windows were blank, and even the front door, as he stood there knocking and ringing repeatedly, had an air of dust and neglect about it which prepared him for the worst. After considerable delay a journeyman plumber unfastened the door and explained that the caretaker had just stepped out, while he him-

self had been employed on a job with the cistern at the back of the house. He was not able to give Vincent much information. The family were all away; they might be abroad, but he did not know for certain; so Vincent had to leave with the questions he longed to put unasked. At South Audley Street he was again disappointed. The servant there had not been long in the place, but knew that Mr. Ashburn, the last lodger, had gone away for good, and had left no address, saying he would write or call for his letters. Holroyd could not be at ease until he had satisfied himself that his friend had been true to him. He almost hated himself for feeling any doubt on the subject, and yet Mark had certainly behaved very strangely; in any case he must try to find out who this Cyril Ernstone might be, and he went on to the City and called at Messrs. Chilton and Fladgate's offices with that intention.

Mr. Fladgate himself came down to receive him in the little room in which Mark Ashburn had once waited.

'You wished to speak to me?' he began.

'You have published a book called "Illusion,"' said Vincent, going straight to the point in his impatience. 'I want to know if you feel at liberty to give me any information as to its author?' Mr. Fladgate's eyebrows went up, and the vertical fold between them deepened.

'Information,' he repeated. 'Oh, dear me, no; it is not our practice, really. But you can put your question of course, if you like, and I will tell you if we should be justified in answering you,' he added, as he saw nothing offensive in his visitor's manner.

'Thank you,' said Vincent. 'I will, then. Would you be justified in telling me if the name of "Cyril Ernstone" is a real or assumed one?'

'A few days ago I should have said certainly not; as it is—I presume you are anxious to meet Mr. Ernstone?'

'I am,' said Vincent; 'very much so.'

'Ah, just so; well, it happens that you need not have given yourself the trouble to come here to ask that question. As you are here, however, I can gratify your curiosity without the slightest breach of confidence. There is our later edition of the book on that table; the title-page will tell you all you want to know.'

Vincent's hand trembled as he took the book. Then he opened it, and the title-page did tell him all. His worst suspicions were more than verified. He had been meanly betrayed by the man he had trusted—the man whom he had thought his dearest friend! The shock stunned him almost as if it had found him totally unprepared.

'It was Mark, then,' he said only half aloud, as he put the book down again very gently.

'Ah, so you know him?' said Mr. Fladgate, who stood by smiling.

'He was one of my oldest friends,' replied Vincent, still in a low voice.

'And you suspected him, eh?' continued the publisher, who was not the most observant of men.

'He took some pains to put me off the scent,' said Vincent.

'Yes; he kept his secret very well, didn't he? Now, you see, he feels quite safe in declaring himself—a very brilliant young man, sir. I congratulate you in finding an old friend in him.'

'I am very fortunate, I know,' said Vincent, grimly.

'Oh, and it will be a pleasant surprise for him too!' said Mr. Fladgate, 'very pleasant on both sides. Success hasn't spoilt him in the least—you won't find him at all stuck up!'

'No,' agreed Vincent, 'I don't think I shall. And now perhaps you will have no objection to give me his present address, and then I need trouble you no longer at present.'

'I see—you would naturally like to congratulate him!'

'I should like to let him know what I think about it,' said Holroyd.

'Exactly—well, let me see, I *ought* to have his address somewhere. I had a letter from him only the other day—did I put it on my file? no, here it is—yes. "Hotel Rheinfall, Gross Laufenburg, Switzerland"—if you write to your friend any time this month, it will find him there.'

Vincent took the address down in his notebook and turned to go.

'Good day,' said Mr. Fladgate, 'delighted to have been of any service to you—by the way, I suppose you saw your friend's'—but before he could allude to Mark Ashburn's marriage he found himself alone, Vincent having already taken a somewhat abrupt departure.

He could not trust himself to hear Mark talked of in this pleasant vein any longer. It had required some effort on his part to restrain himself when he first knew the truth, and only the consciousness that his unsupported assertions

would do no good had kept him silent. He would wait to make his claim until he could bring evidence that could not be disregarded—he would go to Mark Ashburn and force him to give him an acknowledgment which would carry conviction to every mind.

He would go at once. Mark had evidently gone to this place, Gross Laufenburg, with the idea of avoiding him—he would follow him there! He lost no time in making inquiries, and soon learnt that Gross Laufenburg was about an hour's journey from Basle, and that by leaving London next morning he would catch the fast train through from Calais to Basle, and arrive there early on the following day. He made all necessary arrangements for starting, and wrote to Caffyn to say that he was going abroad, though he did not enter into further details, and on receiving this letter Caffyn took the opportunity of gratifying his malicious sense of humour by despatching (at considerable trouble and expense to himself, for Wastwater is far enough from any telegraph poles) the message Mark had received from little Max's hand on the mount.

Vincent set out on his journey with a fierce impatience for the end, when he would find himself face to face with this man whom he had thought his friend, whose affectionate emotion had touched and cheered him when they met at Plymouth, and who had been deliberately deceiving him from the first.

All the night through he pictured the meeting to himself, with a stern joy at the thought of seeing Mark's handsome false face change with terror at the sight of him—would he beg for mercy, or try to defend himself? would he dare to persist in his fraud? At the bare thought of this last possibility a wave of mad passion swept over his brain—he felt that in such a case he could not answer for what he might say or do.

But with the morning calmer thoughts came: he did not want revenge—only justice. Mark should restore everything in full—it was his own fault if he had placed himself in such a position that he could not do that without confessing his own infamy. If there was any way of recovering his own and sparing Mark to some extent in the eyes of the world, he would agree to it for the sake of their old friendship, which had been strong and sincere on his own side at least; but no sentimental considerations should stand between him and his right.

Basle was reached in the early morning, and the pretty city was flushed with rose, and the newly risen sun was sparkling on the variegated roofs and cupolas as he drove across the bridge to the Baden station. He felt jaded and ill after a journey in which he had slept but little, and, finding that he would not be able to go to Laufenburg for some time, was obliged to recruit himself by a few hours' sleep at an hotel.

It was past midday when he awoke, and the next train, which started late in the afternoon, brought him to Laufenburg just as the last sunset rays were reddening the old grey ruin on the hill, and the towns and river below showed themselves in an enchanted atmosphere of violet haze.

Leaving his luggage at the station until he should have found a place to stay at for the night, Vincent walked down to the bridge, intending to go to the Rheinfall Hotel and inquire for Mark. There is a point where the covered portion of the bridge ends, and the structure is supported by a massive stone pier, whose angles, facing up and down the river and protected by a broad parapet, form recesses on either side of the roadway. Here he stopped for a moment, fascinated by the charm of the scene, and, leaning upon the ledge, watched the last touches of scarlet fading out of the slate-coloured cloud-masses in the west. He was roused from this occupation by a voice which called his name in a low tremulous tone which sent the blood rushing back to his heart, and as he turned to see a graceful figure just passing out from under the arched roof towards him, he recognised Mabel Langton.

The dying light fell full on her face, which had an expression half of awe, half of incredulous joy—she came towards him, holding out two eager hands, and the awe vanished, but the joy grew more assured.

'Vincent!' she cried. 'Is it really you? you have come back to us—or am I dreaming?'

He had met her at last, and in this place to which he had come anticipating nothing but pain and contest . . . she had not forgotten him—the glad shining in her sweet eyes told him that, and a great and glorious hope sprang up within him.

In her presence he forgot his wrongs, he forgot the very object of a journey which had thus led him to her side, all his past feelings seemed petty and ignoble, and fame itself a matter of little

worth; he took her small gloved hands and stood there, resting his eyes on the dear face which had haunted his thoughts through all his weary exile.

'Thank God,' he murmured, 'it is no dream—this time!'

CHAPTER XXXIII.

IN SUSPENSE.

Mark, as he left his wife with that hastily invented excuse of the forgotten tobacco, turned back with a blind instinct of escape; he went to the foot of the hilly little street down which Mabel and he had lately passed, and halted there undecidedly; then he saw a flight of rough steps by a stone fountain and climbed them, clutching the wooden rail hard as he went up; they led to a little row of cabins, barricaded by stacks of pine-wood, and further on there was another short flight of steps, which brought him out upon a little terrace in front of a primitive stucco church. Here he paused to recover breath and think, if thought was possible. Above the irregular line of high-pitched brown roofs at his feet he could just catch a glimpse of the rushing green Rhine, with the end of the covered way on the bridge and the little recess beyond. It was light enough still for him to see clearly the pair that stood in that recess: Vincent's broad figure leaning earnestly towards that other one—he was drawing closer—now he drew back again as if to watch the effect of his words. Mark knew well what she must be hearing down there. He strained his eyes as the dusk shrouded the two more and more; he thought that, even there, he would be able to see a change when the blow fell. 'Mabel, my darling—my innocent darling!' he groaned aloud, 'have pity on me—do not give me up!' From the opposite side he could hear the faint strains of a street organ which was playing a lively popular air; it had come in that morning, and he and Mabel had been amused at the excitement it produced amongst its unsophisticated inhabitants; it had exhausted its *répertoire* over and over again, but its popularity seemed yet undiminished.

As he leaned there on the rough stone parapet his panic gradually abated, and the suspense became intolerable; he could not stay there. By this time too the worst must have happened; it was useless to try to avoid the inevitable; he would go down and face his doom, without giving her further cause to despise him. The idea of denying the charge never occurred to him for a moment; he knew that face to face with his accuser such audacity was beyond his powers; he had nothing to say in defence, but he must hear his sentence.

And so, in a sort of despairing apathy, he went steadily down again to the street level, and, with a self-command for which he had not dared to hope, passed with a firm tread along the covered way across the bridge.

* * * * * *

After the first surprise of meeting, Vincent had had to explain, in answer to Mabel's eager questions, the manner in which he had escaped being a victim to the 'Mangalore' disaster; the explanation was commonplace enough, and when it was given she exclaimed reproachfully, 'But why did you lead us all to believe that the worst had happened? You must have known how it would grieve us; it was not like you, Vincent.'

'But I wrote,' he rejoined; 'surely you got my letter, Mabel?'

'You *did* write, then?' she said. 'I am glad of that. But the letter never came. I never dreamed that there was the slightest hope till I saw you here. I hardly dared to speak to you at first. And how do you come to be here at all? You have not told me that yet.'

'I was on my way to punish a scoundrel,' he said abruptly, 'but I had almost forgotten all that. Never mind about me, Mabel; tell me about yourself now. You don't know how I have been longing for the very smallest news of you!'

'What am I to tell you?' said Mabel smiling. 'Where shall I begin, Vincent?'

'Well, first, your own question back again,' he said. 'How do *you* come to be here, and all alone? Are your people at the hotel? Am I to see them to-night?'

'My people are all at Glenthorpe just now,' said Mabel with some natural surprise, which, however, only made Vincent conclude she must be travelling with friends. Were they her future parents-in-law, he wondered jealously. He could not rest till he knew how that was.

'Mabel,' he said earnestly, 'they told me you were engaged; is it true?'

She had not yet grown quite accus-

tomed to her new dignity as a wife, and felt a certain shyness in having to announce it to Vincent.

'It was,' she said, looking down; 'it is not true now. Haven't you really heard that, Vincent?'

But, instead of reading her embarrassment aright, he saw in it an intimation that his worst fears were without foundation. He had not come too late. She was free—there was hope for him yet. But even then he did not dare to express the wild joy he felt.

'Do you mean,' he said—and his voice betrayed nothing—'that it is broken off?'

'Broken off!' she repeated, with a little touch of bewilderment. 'Why—oh, Vincent, what a dreadful thing to ask! I thought you would understand, and you don't a bit. I am not engaged now, because—because this is my wedding journey!'

If Vincent had been slow to understand before, he understood now. It was all over; this was final; irrevocable. The radiant prospect which had seemed to open a moment before to his dazzled eyes had closed for ever. For a moment or two he did not speak. If he had made any sound it would have been a cry of pain; but he repressed it. That must be his secret now, and he would keep it till death. He kept it well then at least, for there was no faltering in his voice as he said slowly, 'I did not know. You will let me congratulate you, Mabel, and—and wish you every happiness.'

'Thank you, Vincent,' said Mabel not too warmly, thinking that, from so old a friend as Vincent, these felicitations were cold and conventional.

'You are happy, are you not?' he asked anxiously.

'Happier than I ever thought possible,' she said softly. 'When you see my—my husband' (she spoke the word with a pretty, shy pride), 'and know how good he is, Vincent, you will understand.' If she had ever suspected the place she filled in Vincent's heart she would have spared him this; as it was she treated him as an affectionate elder brother, who needed to be convinced that she had chosen wisely; and it was in some degree his own fault that she did so; he had never given her reason to think otherwise.

'I wish he would come; I can't think where he can be all this time,' continued Mabel. 'I want you to know one another. I am sure you will like Mark, Vincent, when you know him.'

Vincent started now unmistakably; not all his self-control could prevent that. Till that moment it had not occurred to him that Mabel's presence there, in the town where he had expected to come upon Mark, was more than a coincidence. He had been led to believe that Mark and she were not even acquainted, and even the discovery that she was married did not prepare him for something more overwhelming still.

'Mark!' he cried. 'Did you say Mark? Is that your husband's name? Not—not *Mark Ashburn?*'

'How that seems to astonish you,' said Mabel. 'But I forgot; how stupid of me! Why, you are a friend of his, are you not?'

Holroyd's anger came back to him all at once, with a deadly force that turned his heart to stone.

'I used to be,' he answered coldly, not caring very much just then in his bitterness if the scorn he felt betrayed itself or not. But Mabel took his answer literally.

'Why, of course,' she said. 'I remember we came upon your portrait once at home, and he asked if it was not you, and said you were one of his oldest friends.'

'I thought he would have forgotten that,' was all Vincent's answer.

'I am quite sure he will be very glad to welcome you back again,' said Mabel, 'and you will be glad to hear that since you saw him he has become famous. You have been so long away that you may not have heard of the great book he has written, "Illusion."'

'I have read it,' said Vincent shortly. 'I did not know he wrote it.'

'He did write it,' said Mabel. 'But for that we might never have known one another. He has to admit that, even though he does try to run down his work sometimes, and insist that it has been very much overrated!'

'He says so, does he?' Vincent replied. 'Yes, I can quite understand that.'

Some intonation in his voice struck Mabel's ear.

'Perhaps you agree with him?' she retorted jealously.

Holroyd laughed harshly.

'No, indeed,' he said, 'I should be the last man in the world to do that. I only meant I could understand your husband taking that view. I read the book with intense interest, I assure you.'

'You don't speak as if you quite meant me to believe that,' she said. 'I'm afraid the book was not practical enough to

please you, Vincent. Ceylon seems to have hardened you.'

'Very possibly,' he replied; and then followed a short silence, during which Mabel was thinking that he had certainly altered—hardly for the better, and Holroyd was wondering how much longer he would have to bear this. He was afraid of himself, feeling the danger of a violent outburst which might reveal her delusion with a too brutal plainness. She must know all some time, but not there—not then.

He had finally mastered any rebellious impulses, however, as Mabel, who had been anxiously watching the bridge for some time, went to meet someone with a glad cry of relief. He heard her making some rapid explanations, and then she returned, followed by Mark Ashburn.

Mabel's greeting told the wretched Mark that the blow had not fallen yet. Vincent evidently was determined to spare neither of them. Let him strike now, then; the less delay the better.

He walked up to the man who was his executioner with a dull, dogged expectation of what was coming. He tried to keep himself straight, but he felt that his head was shaking as if with palsy, and he was grateful that the dusk hid his face.

'Here is Mark, at last,' said Mabel. 'He will tell you himself that he at least has not forgotten.'

But Mark said nothing; he did not even put out his hand. He stood silently waiting for the other to speak. Vincent was silent, too, for a time, looking at him fixedly. This was how they had met, then. He had pictured that meeting many times lately, but it had never been anything like the reality. And Mabel still suspected nothing. There was a touch of comedy of a ghastly kind in the situation, which gave Vincent a grim amusement, and he felt a savage pleasure, of which he was justly ashamed later, in developing it.

'I have been trying to explain to your wife,' he said at last, 'that I have been away so long that I could hardly hope you would remember the relations between us.'

Mark made some reply to this; he did not know what.

'At least,' Vincent continued calmly, 'I may congratulate you upon the success of your book. I should have done so when we met the other day if I had understood then that you were the author. Your modesty did not allow you to mention it, and so I discover it later.'

Mark said nothing, though his dry lips moved.

'When you met!' cried Mabel in wonder. 'Did *you* know Vincent was alive then, Mark? And you never told me!'

'He naturally did not think it would interest you, you see,' said Vincent.

'No,' said Mabel, turning to Mark, 'you couldn't know that Vincent had once been almost one of the family; I forgot that. If you had only thought of telling me!'

The two men were silent again, and Mabel felt hurt and disappointed at Vincent's want of cordiality. He seemed to take it for granted that he had been forgotten. He would thaw presently, and she did her best to bring this about by all the means in her power, in her anxiety that the man she respected should do justice to the man she loved.

That conversation was, as far as Mark was concerned, like the one described in 'Aurora Leigh'—

> 'Every common word
> Seemed tangled with the thunder at one end,
> And ready to pull down upon their heads
> A terror out of sight.'

The terror was close at hand when Mabel said, in the course of her well-meant efforts to bring them into conversation, 'It was quite by accident, do you know, Mark, that Vincent should have met us here at all; he was on his way to find some man who has——I forget what you said he had done, Vincent.'

'I don't think I went into particulars,' he replied. 'I described him generally as a scoundrel. And he is.'

'I hope you were able to find that out before he could do you any injury?' said Mabel.

'Unfortunately, no,' he said. 'When I found out, the worst was done.'

'Would you rather not talk about it,' she continued, 'or do you mind telling us how you were treated?'

Vincent hesitated; just then the sense of his wrong, the sight of the man who had deceived him, made him hard as adamant. Could he desire a fuller satisfaction than was offered him now?

'It's rather a long story,' he said; 'perhaps this is not quite the place to tell it. *You* might find it interesting, though, from the literary point of view,' he added, turning suddenly on Mark, who did not attempt to meet his eyes.

'Tell it by all means, then,' said the latter, without moving his head.

'No; you shall hear it another time,' said Holroyd. 'Put shortly, it's this: I trusted the other man; he deceived me. Nothing very original in that, is there?'

'I'm afraid not,' said Mabel. 'Did he rob you, Vincent? Have you lost much?'

'Much more than money! Yes, he robbed me first and paid me the compliment of a highly artistic chain of lies afterwards. That was a needless waste; the ordinary sort of lie would have been quite enough for me—from him.'

Mark heard all this with a savage inclination at first to cut the scene short, and say to Mabel, 'He means Me. *I* robbed him! *I* lied to him! *I* am the scoundrel—it's all true! I own it—now let me go!'

But he let Holroyd take his own course in the end, with an apathetic acknowledgment that he had the right to revenge himself to the very utmost.

The house at the nearer end of the bridge had a small projecting gallery, where he remembered having seen a tame fox run out when he was there in the autumn before. He caught himself vaguely speculating whether the fox was there still, or if it had died; and yet he heard every word that Vincent was saying.

'And what do you mean to do with him when you meet?' asked Mabel.

'Ah,' said Vincent, 'I have thought over that a good deal. I have often wondered whether I could keep calm enough to say what I mean to say. I think I shall; in these civilised days we have to repress ourselves now and then, but that won't, of course, prevent me from punishing him as he deserves; and, when those nearest and dearest to him know him as he really is, and turn from him, even he will feel that a punishment!' (He turned to Mark again) 'Don't you agree with me?' he asked.

Mark moistened his lips before answering. 'I think you will find it very easy to punish him,' he said.

'Is he—is he married?' asked Mabel.

'Oh, yes,' said Vincent; 'I was told that his wife believes in him still.'

'And you are going to undeceive her?' she said.

'She must know the truth. That is part of his punishment,' replied Vincent.

'But it will be so terrible for her, poor thing!' said Mabel, with an infinite compassion in her voice. 'What if the truth were to *kill* her?'

'Better that,' he said bitterly, 'than to go on loving a lie! Whatever happens, her husband is responsible, not I. That is the correct view, Ashburn, I think?'

'Quite correct,' said Mark.

'It may be correct,' cried Mabel indignantly, 'but it is very cruel! I didn't think you could be so harsh, either of you. Of course, I don't know what the man has done; perhaps if I did *I* might be "correct" too. But, Vincent, I do ask you to think a little of his poor wife. She, at least, has done you no harm! Is there no way—no way at all—to get back something of what you have lost; even to punish the man, if you must, and yet spare his wife?'

'If there were,' he cried passionately, 'do you suppose I would not take it? Is it my fault that this man has done me such a wrong that he can only make amends for it by exposing himself? What can I do?'

'I suppose there is no help for it, then,' agreed Mabel reluctantly, 'but I wish she had not to suffer too. Only think what it must be to have to give up believing in one's husband!' and as she spoke she slid a confiding hand through Mark's arm.

There was another silence, and, as it seemed plain now that the interview was not likely to be a success, she made haste to end it. 'We must say good-bye now, Vincent,' she said. 'I hope you are not so harsh as your words.'

'I don't know. I feel considerably harsher just now, I think,' he said. 'Good-bye then, Mrs. Ashburn. By the way, Ashburn,' he added in a slightly lowered tone, 'there is something I have to say to you.'

'I know,' muttered Mark doggedly. 'Are you going to say it now?'

'No, not now,' he answered; 'you must meet me—where shall we say? I don't know this place—here? No, on that little terrace over there, by the fountain; it will be quieter. Be there at nine.—I am going to tell your husband the details of that story, Mabel,' he continued aloud, 'and then we shall decide what to do. You will spare him to me for half an hour?'

'Oh, yes,' said Mabel, cheerfully. She thought this looked as if they were going to arrive at a better understanding. Mark looked at Vincent, but his face was impenetrable in the dim light as he added, again in an undertone, 'You are

to say nothing until I give you leave. If you are not at the place by nine, remember, I shall come to you.'

'Oh, I will be there,' said Mark recklessly; and they parted.

As Mabel and Mark were walking back, she said suddenly, 'I suppose, when you met Vincent last, you told him that you were going to marry me, Mark?'

'Didn't he say so?' he answered, prevaricating even then.

'I thought you must have done so,' she said, and was silent.

Vincent *had* known then. He had deliberately kept away from them all. He had pretended to ignore the marriage when they met; that was his way of resenting it. She had not thought of this till then, and it confirmed her in the idea that Ceylon had sadly changed him.

They dined alone together in the large bare *Speise-Saal*, for the handsome hotel was scarcely ever occupied even in the season. Now they had it all to themselves, and the waiters almost fought with another for the privilege of attending upon them. The 'Director' himself—a lively, talkative little German who felt his managerial talents wasted in this wilderness—came in to superintend their meals, partly to refresh himself by the contemplation of two real guests, but chiefly to extend his English vocabulary.

Hitherto Mark had considered him a nuisance, but he was glad that evening when the host followed the fish in with his customary greeting, 'Good-night! You haf made a goot valk? Guten appetit—yes?' and proceeded to invite them to a grand concert, which was to take place in the hotel the following Sunday. 'Zere vill pe ze pandt from Klein-Laufenburg; it is all brass, and it is better as you vill not go too near. Zey blow vair strong ven zey go off, but a laty from heir vill gambole peautifully after zem on ze piano. You vill come—yes?'

When he had gone at last little Max came in and stood by Mabel, with his mouth gaping like a young bird's for chance fragments of dessert. Mark was grateful to him, too, for diverting her attention from himself. He grew more and more silent as the long Black Forest clock by the shining porcelain stove ticked slowly on towards the hour. It was time to go, and he rose with a shiver.

'You will not be very long away, will you, dear?' said Mabel, looking up from the orange she was peeling for the child.

'And you will do what you can for the poor woman, I know.'

'Yes, yes,' he said as he reached the door. 'Good-bye, Mabel!'

'Good-bye,' she said, nodding to him brightly. 'Max, say "Good-evening, Herr Mark; a pleasant walk,"' but Max backed away behind the stove, declining to commit himself to an unknown tongue. Mark took a last look at her laughing gaily there in the lamplight. Would he ever hear her laugh like that again? How would he ever find courage to tell her? There was little need just then of Holroyd's prohibition.

He went down the hotel steps to the little open space where the two streets unite, and where the oil lamp suspended above by cords dropped a shadow like a huge spider on the pale patch of lighted ground below. The night was warm and rather dark; no one was about at that hour; the only sound was the gurgle of the fountain in the corner, where the water-jets gleamed out of the blackness like rods of twisted crystal. He entered the narrow street, or rather alley, leading to the bridge. In the state of blank misery he was in his eye seized upon the smallest objects as if to distract his mind, and he observed—as he might not have done had he been happy—that in the lighted upper room of the corner house they had trained growing ivy along the low-raftered ceiling.

So, too, as he went on he noticed details in each dim small-paned shop-front he passed. The tobacconist's big wooden negro, sitting with bundles of Hamburg cigars in his lap and filling up the whole of the window; the two rows of dangling silver watches at the watchmaker's; the butcher's unglazed slab, with its strong iron bars, behind which one small and solitary joint was caged like something dangerous to society; even the grotesque forms in which the jugs and vases at the china shop were shadowed on the opposite wall.

He looked up at a quaint metal inn-sign, an ancient ship, which swung from a wrought-iron bracket overhead. 'When next I pass under that!' he thought.

He came to the end of the street at last, when his way to the place of meeting lay straight on, but he turned to his right instead, past the *Zoll-Verein*—where the chief was busy writing by the window under his linen-shaded oil-lamp—and on to the bridge as if some irresistible attraction were drawing him.

When he reached the recess opposite

to that in which Mabel had met Vincent he stopped mechanically and looked around; the towns were perfectly still, save for the prolonged organ note of the falls, which soon ceases to strike the ear. On either bank the houses gleamed pale under a low sky, where the greenish moonlight struggled through a rack of angry black clouds. While he stood there the clock under the church cupola above struck the quarters and clanged out the hour, followed, after a becoming pause, by the gatehouse clock across the river, and such others as the twin towns possessed.

It was nine o'clock. Vincent Holroyd was waiting there on the terrace, stern and pitiless.

Mark made a movement as if to leave the recess, and then stopped short. It was no use; he could not face Holroyd. He looked over the side, down on the water swirling by, in which the few house lights were reflected in a dull and broken glimmer. Was there any escape for him there?

It would only be a plunge down into that swollen rushing torrent, and he would be past all rescue. An instant of suffocating pain, then singing in his ears, sparks in his eyes, unconsciousness —annihilation perhaps—who knew? Just then any other world, any other penalty, seemed preferable to life and Mabel's contempt.

From the recess he could see an angle of the hotel, and one of the windows of their room. It was lighted; Mabel was sitting there in the armchair, perhaps waiting for him. If he went back he must tell her. If he went back!

Whether he lived or died, she was equally lost to him now. His life would bring her only misery and humiliation—at least he could leave her free!

Vincent would speak and think less hardly of him then, and, if not, would it matter?

His mind was made up—he would do it! He looked towards Mabel's window with a wild, despairing gaze. 'Forgive me!' he cried with a hoarse sob, as if she could hear, and then he threw off his hat and sprang upon the broad parapet.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ON THE LAUFENPLATZ.

Vincent had left the *Gasthaus zur Post*, the old-fashioned inn outside Klein Laufenburg, at which he had taken up his quarters for the night, a little before nine, and walked down the street, with his mind finally made up as to the course he meant to take, although he shrank from the coming interview almost as intensely as Mark himself. He passed under the covered way of the bridge, and had nearly reached the open part, when he recognised the man he was coming to meet standing in one of the recesses. He noticed him look round in evident fear of observation. He did not seem, however, to have seen or heard Vincent, and presently the latter saw him throw his hat away, as if in preparation for action of some sort. Vincent guessed at once what he was intending to do; it darted across his mind that this might be the best solution of the difficulty—he had only to keep silent for a few seconds. Was it certain even now that he could prevent this self-destruction if he would? But such inhumanity was impossible to him. Instinctively he rushed forward out of the shadow and, seizing Mark by the arm as he sprang upon the parapet, dragged him roughly back.

'You coward!' he cried, 'you fool! This is the way you keep your appointment, is it? You can do that afterwards if you like—just now you will come with me.'

Tragic as a rash act such as Mark was contemplating is when successful, an interruption brings with it an inevitable bathos; when he first felt that grasp on his arm, he thought himself in the power of a German policeman, and, prepared as he was a moment before to face a sudden death, he quailed before the prospect of some degrading and complicated official process; it was almost a relief to see instead his bitterest enemy!

He made no attempt at resistance or escape—perhaps life seemed more tolerable after all now he had been brought back to it; he went meekly back with Vincent, who still held his arm firmly, and they reached the Laufenplatz without another word.

The little terrace above the Rhine was almost dark, the only light came in a reflected form from a street lamp round the corner, and they had to pick their way round the octagonal stone fountain and between the big iron salmon cages, to some seats under the five bare elms by the railings. There Vincent sat down to recover breath, for the scene he had just gone through was beginning to tell upon him, and he was overcome by a feeling of faintness which made him unable to speak for some moments. Mean-

while Mark stood opposite by the railings waiting sullenly, until Vincent rose at last and came to his side; he spoke low and with difficulty, but, in spite of the torrent roaring over the rocks below, Mark heard every word.

'I suppose,' Vincent began, 'I need not tell you why I wished to see you?'

'No,' said Mark; 'I know.'

'From your manner on the bridge just now,' continued Holroyd, relentlessly, 'it looked almost as if you wished to avoid a meeting—why should you? I told you I wished my authorship to be kept a secret, and you sheltered it with your own name. Very few friends would have done that!'

'You have the right to indulge in this kind of pleasantry,' said the tortured Mark; 'I know that—only be moderate if you can. Cut the sneers and the reproaches short, and give me the finishing stroke; do you suppose I don't *feel* what I am?'

'Reproaches are ungenerous, of course, retorted Holroyd; 'I am coming to the "finishing stroke," as you call it, in my own time; but first, though you may consider it bad taste on my part, I want to know a little more about all this. If it's painful to you, I'm sorry—but you scarcely have the right to be sensitive.'

'Oh, I have no rights!' said Mark bitterly.

'I'll try not to abuse mine,' said Vincent, more calmly, 'but I can't understand why you did this—you could write books for yourself, what made you covet mine?'

'I'll tell you all there is to tell,' said Mark; 'I didn't covet your book—it was like this; my own novels had both been rejected. I knew I had no chance, as things were, of ever getting a publisher to look at them. I felt I only wanted a fair start. Then Fladgate got it into his head that I was the author of that manuscript of yours. I *did* tell him how it really was, but he wouldn't believe me, and then—upon my soul, Holroyd, I thought you were dead!'

'And had no rights!' concluded the other drily; 'I see—go on.'

'I was mad, I suppose,' continued Mark; 'I let him think he was right. And then I met Mabel . . . by that time everybody knew me as the author of "Illusion." I—I could not tell her I was not . . . Then we were engaged, and, four days before the wedding, you came back—you know all the rest.'

'Yes, I know the rest,' cried Vincent, passionately; 'you came to meet me—how overcome you were! I thought it was joy, and thanked Heaven, like the fool I was, that I had anyone in the world to care so much about me! And you let me tell you about—about *her*; and you and Caffyn between you kept me in the dark till you could get me safely out of the way. It was a clever scheme—you managed it admirably. You need not have stolen from anyone with such powers of constructing a plot of your own! There is just one thing, though, I should like to have explained. I wrote Mabel a letter—I know now that she never received it—why?'

'How can I tell?' said Mark. 'Good God! Holroyd, you don't suspect me of *that!*'

'Are you so far above suspicion?' asked Vincent; 'it would only be a very few more pages!'

'Well, I deserve it,' said Mark, 'but whether you believe me or not, I never saw a letter of yours until the other day. I never imagined you were alive even till I read your letter to me.'

'That must have been a delightful surprise for you,' said Vincent; 'you kept your head, though—you did not let it interfere with your arrangements. You have married her—*you*—of all the men in the world! Nothing can ever undo that now—nothing!'

'I have married her,' said Mark; 'God forgive me for it! But at least she cares for no one else, Holroyd. She loves me—whatever I am!'

'You need not tell me that,' interrupted Vincent; 'I know it. I have seen it for myself—you have been clever even in that!'

'What do you mean?' asked Mark.

'Do you know what that book of mine was to me?' continued Vincent, without troubling to answer; 'I put all that was best of myself into it, I thought it might plead for me some day, perhaps, to a heart I hoped to touch; and I come back to find that you have won the heart, and not even left me my book!'

'As for the book,' said Mark, 'that will be yours again now.'

'I meant to make it so when I came here,' Vincent answered. 'I meant to force you to own my rights, whatever the acknowledgment cost you. . . . But I know now that I must give that up. I abandon all claim to the book; you have chosen to take it—you can keep it!'

The revulsion of feeling caused by so unexpected an announcement almost turned Mark's head for the moment; he

caught Vincent by the arm in his excitement.

'What,' he cried, 'is this a trick—are you in earnest—you will spare me after all? You must not, Vincent, I can't have it—I don't deserve it!'

Vincent drew back coldly: 'Did I say you deserved it?' he asked, with a contempt that stung Mark.

'Then I won't accept it, do you hear?' he persisted; 'you shall not make this sacrifice for me!'

Holroyd laughed grimly enough: 'For you!' he repeated; 'you don't suppose I should tamely give up everything for *you*, do you?'

'Then,' faltered Mark, 'why—why ——?'

'Why am I going to let you alone? Do you remember what I told you on that platform at Plymouth?—*that* is why. If I had only known then, I would have fought my hardest to expose you, if it was necessary to save her in that way—for her sake, not mine. I don't suppose there ever was much hope for me. As it is, you have been clever enough to choose the one shield through which I can't strike you—if I ever thought more of that wretched book than of her happiness, it was only for a moment—she knows nothing as yet, and she must never know!'

'She will know it some day,' said Mark, heavily.

'Why should she know?' demanded Vincent, impatiently; 'you don't mean that that infernal Caffyn knows?'

'No, no,' replied Mark, in all sincerity; 'Caffyn doesn't know—how could he? But you can't hide these things: you—you may have talked about it yourself already!'

'I have not talked about it!' said Vincent, sharply; 'perhaps I was not too proud of having been gulled so easily. Can't you understand? This secret rests between you and me at present, and I shall never breathe a word of it—you can feel perfectly safe—you are Mabel's husband!'

It is to be feared that Vincent's manner was far enough from the sublime and heroic; he gave up his book and his fame from the conviction that he could not do otherwise; but it was not easy for all that, and he did not try to disguise the bitter contempt he felt for the cause.

Mark could not endure the humiliation of such a pardon—his spirit rose in revolt against it.

'Do you think I will be forgiven like this?' he cried, recklessly. 'I don't want your mercy! I won't take it! If you won't speak, I shall!'

Vincent had not expected any resistance from Mark, and this outburst, which was genuine enough, showed that he was not utterly beneath contempt, even then.

Holroyd's manner was less harsh and contemptuous when he next spoke:

'It's no use, Ashburn,' he said firmly; 'it's too late for all that now—you *must* accept it!'

'I shall not,' said Mark again. 'I've been a scoundrel, I know, but I'll be one no longer; I'll tell the truth and give you back your own. I will do what's right at last!'

'Not in that way,' said Vincent; 'I forbid it. I have the right to be obeyed in this, and you shall obey me. Listen to me, Ashburn; you can't do this—you forget Mabel. You have made her love you and trust her happiness to your keeping; your honour is hers now. Can't you see what shame and misery you will plunge her in by such a confession? It may clear your conscience, but it must darken her life—and that's too heavy a price to pay for such a mere luxury as peace of mind.'

'How can I go on deceiving her?' groaned Mark; 'it will drive me mad!'

'It will do nothing of the sort!' retorted Holroyd, his anger returning; 'I know you better—in a couple of days it won't even affect your appetite! Why, if I had not come over here, if I had gone out again to India as you hoped I should, you were prepared to go on deceiving her—your mind kept its balance well enough then!'

Mark knew this was true, and held his tongue.

'Think of me as safe in India, then,' Vincent continued more quietly. 'I shall trouble you quite as little. But this secret is mine as well as yours—and I will not have it told. If you denounce yourself now, who will be the better for it? Think what it will cost her. . . . You *do* love her, don't you?' he asked, with a fierce anxiety; 'you—you have not married her for other reasons?'

'You think I am too bad even to love honestly,' said Mark, bitterly; 'but I do.'

'Prove it, then,' said Vincent. 'You heard her pleading on the bridge for the woman who would suffer by her husband's shame: she was pleading for herself then—and not to me only, to you! Have pity on her; she is so young to

lose all her faith and love and hope at once. You can never let her know what you have been; you can only try to become all she believes you to be.'

In his heart, perhaps, Mark was not sorry to be convinced that what he had resolved to do was impossible. The high-strung mood in which he had been ready to proclaim his wrong-doing was already passing away. Vincent had gained his point.

'You are right,' Mark said slowly; 'I *will* keep it from her if I can.'

'Very well,' Vincent answered, 'that is settled, then. If she asks you what has passed between us, you can say that I have told you my story, but that you are not at liberty to speak of it. Mabel will not try to know more. Stay, I will write a line' (and he went to the corner of the street and wrote a few words on a leaf from his note-book). 'Give that to her,' he said as he returned. 'And now I think we've nothing more to say.'

'Only one other thing,' stammered Mark; 'I must do this. . . . When they —they published your book they paid me. . . . I never touched the money. I have brought it with me to-night; you must take it!' and he held out a small packet of notes.

Vincent turned haughtily away. 'Excuse me,' he said, 'it is not mine; I will have nothing to do with it. Under the circumstances, you can't expect me to touch that money. Keep it; do what you choose with it.'

'I choose this, then!' said Mark, violently, and tearing the notes up, he flung them over the railings to drift down on the rocks or into the tossing grey foam beyond.

'You need not have done that,' said Holroyd, coldly; 'there were the poor. But just as you please!' and he made a movement as if to go.

Mark stopped him with a gesture.

'Are you going like this?' he said, and his voice trembled. 'If you knew all I felt, even you might pity me a little! Can't you forgive?'

Vincent turned. 'No,' he said, shortly, 'I can't. I put temptation in your way, and though I never dreamed then that it could be a temptation to you, I could have forgiven you for giving way to it when you believed me dead. But I came back, and you went on with it; you lied to me—more, you dared to marry *her*, without a care for the shame and sorrow, which was all you had to bring her. If I said I forgave you for that, it would be a mockery. I don't, and I can't!'

'I see,' said Mark. 'When we meet again we are to be strangers, then?'

'No,' said Vincent; 'if we meet we must do so as ordinary acquaintances—for Mabel's sake. But there are no appearances to keep up here. Can't you see I want to be left to myself?' he asked, with a sudden burst of nervous irritation.

'Have your way, then?' said Mark, and left him there by the railings.

Mark's first feelings as he walked slowly back up the little street, where the little shops were all shuttered and dark now, were by no means enviable; he felt infinitely mean and small in his own eyes, and shrank from entering Mabel's presence while his nerves were still crawling under the scorching contempt of Vincent's dismissal. If, during the interview, there had been moments when he was deeply contrite and touched at the clemency so unexpectedly shown him, the manner of his pardon seemed to release him from all obligations to gratitude—he had only been forgiven for another's sake; and for a time he almost loathed so disgraceful an immunity, and felt the deep humiliation of a sentence that condemned him 'to pay the price of lies by being constrained to lie on still.' But by degrees, even in that short walk, his elastic temperament began to assert itself; after all, it might have been worse. He might by now have been drifting, dead and disfigured, down the river to Basle; he might have been going back to Mabel with the fearful necessity upon him of telling her all that night. One person knew him, and despised him for what he was; but that person would never tell his secret. That painful scene which had just passed would never have to be gone through again; he could think of it as a horrible dream. Yes, he was safe now, *really* safe this time. His position was far more secure than when he had read that telegram of Caffyn's; and here he wondered, for the first time, whether Caffyn had been deliberately misled or only mistaken in sending such a delusive message. But that did not very much matter now, and he soon abandoned speculation on the subject. He had much to be thankful for; his future was free from all danger. He had had a severe lesson, and he would profit by it; henceforth (with the one necessary reservation) he would be honest and true—Mabel should never repent her trust in him. 'Sweet Bells

Jangled' would be before the world by the time they returned, and after that he feared nothing. And so, though he was subdued and silent on his return, there was no other trace in his manner of what he had suffered during the last hour. He found Mabel by the window of their sitting-room, looking out at the houses across the river, which were now palely clear in the cold moonlight, their lights extinguished, and only a pane glittering here and there in some high dormer window, while the irregular wooden galleries and hanging outhouses were all thrown up vividly by the intense shadows.

'What a very long time you have been away!' she said; 'but I know Vincent can be very pleasant and interesting if he likes.'

'Very,' said Mark, and gave her Holroyd's note.

'I leave here early to-morrow for Italy,' she read, 'and may not see you again for some little time. I have told your husband my story, but, on consideration, have thought it best to pledge him to tell no one—not even you. But the man who injured me shall be safe for your sake.'

'You *did* persuade him, then!' she said, looking up gratefully to Mark. 'Oh, I am glad! How good you are, and how well you must have spoken, dear, to make him give up his idea of punishing the man! So Vincent is going away at once. Do you know I am afraid I am rather glad?'

And Mark made no answer; what was there to say?

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Vincent stood there by the railings on the Laufenplatz for some time after Mark had left him; he was feeling the reaction both in mind and body from his recent conflict. 'How will it all end?' he asked himself wearily. 'Can any good come from letting this deceit go on? Is he strong enough to carry out his part? If not, the truth will only come at last, and be even more cruel when it does come.' Yet he had done what still seemed the obvious and only thing to do, if Mabel's happiness was considered. He was ashamed even that he had not seen it earlier, and trembled as he remembered that only a providential chance had restrained him from some fatal disclosure to Mabel that afternoon on the bridge. But at least he had acted for the best, and he would hope for it.

Thinking thus, he recrossed the river to Klein-Laufenburg, where a mounted German officer, many sizes too big for the little street, was rousing it from the first slumber as he clattered along, with his horse's hoofs striking sparks from the rough cobbles, and passed under the old gateway, where his accoutrements gleamed for an instant in the lamplight before horse and rider vanished in the darkness beyond. Vincent passed out, too, out on the broad white road, and down the hill to his homely *Gasthaus*. He felt weak and very lonely—lonelier even than when he had parted from Mabel long ago on the eve of his Ceylon voyage. He could hope then; now he had lost her for ever! Still, one of his wishes had been granted—he had been able to be of service to her, to make some sacrifice for her dear sake. She would never know either of his love or his sacrifice, and though he could not pretend that there was no bitterness in that, he felt that it was better thus. 'After all,' he thought, 'she loves that fellow. She would never have cared for me.' And there was truth in this last conclusion. Even if Mabel and Mark had never met, and she could have known Vincent as he was, the knowledge might not have taught her to love. A woman cannot give her heart as a *prix Montyon*, or there might be more bachelors than there are.

CHAPTER XXXV.

MISSED FIRE!

It was an evening early in May, and Harold Caffyn was waiting at Victoria for the arrival of the Dover train, which was bringing back Mark and Mabel from the Continent. This delicate attention on his part was the result of a painful uncertainty which had been vexing him ever since the morning on which he read Vincent's farewell note at Wastwater. 'It is a poor tale,' as Mrs. Poyser might say, to throw your bomb and never have the satisfaction of hearing it explode—and yet that was his position; he had 'shot his arrow into the air,' like Longfellow; but, less fortunate than the poet, he was anything but sure that his humble effort had reached 'the heart of a friend.' Now he was going to know. One thing he had ascertained from the Langtons—Vincent Holroyd had cer-

tainly followed the couple to Laufenburg, and they had seen him there—Harold had found Mrs. Langton full of the wonderful news of the return of the dead. But nothing had come of it as yet; if there was a sensation in store for the literary world, Mabel's letters apparently contained no hint of it, and for a time Caffyn felt unpleasantly apprehensive that there might have been a hitch somehow in his admirable arrangements. Then he reflected that Mabel would naturally spare her mother as long as possible; he would not believe that after all the trouble he had taken, after Holroyd had actually hunted down the culprit, the secret could have been kept from her any longer. No, she must know the real truth, though she might be proud enough to mask her sufferings while she could. But still he longed for some visible assurance that his revenge had not unaccountably failed; and, as he had ascertained that they were to return on this particular evening, and were not to be met except by the Langton carriage, it occurred to him that here would be an excellent opportunity of observing Mabel at a time when she would not imagine it necessary to wear a mask. He would take care to remain unseen himself; a single glance would tell him all he needed to know, and he promised himself enjoyment of a refined and spiritual kind in reading the effects of his revenge on the vivid face he had loved once, and hated now with such malignant intensity. The train came in with a fringe of expectant porters hanging on the footboards, and as the doors flew open to discharge a crowd, flurried but energetic, like stirred ants, even Caffyn's well-regulated pulse beat faster.

He had noticed Champion waiting on the platform and kept his eye upon him in the bustle that followed; he was going up to a compartment now—that must be Mark he was touching his hat to as he received directions; Caffyn could not see Mark's face yet, as his back was towards him, but he could see Mabel's as she stepped lightly out on the platform—there was a bright smile on her face as she acknowledged the footman's salute, and seemed to be asking eager questions. Caffyn felt uncomfortable, for there was nothing forced about her smile, no constraint in her eyes as she turned to Mark when they were alone again, and seemed to be expressing her eager delight at being home again. And Mark, too, had the face of a man without a care in the world—something must have gone wrong, terribly wrong, it was clear! They were coming towards him; he had meant to avoid them at first, but now his curiosity would not allow this, and he threw himself in their way, affecting an artless surprise and pleasure at being the first to welcome them back. Mark did not appear at all disconcerted to see him, and Mabel could not be frigid to anybody just then in the flush of happy expectation, which she did not try to conceal; altogether it was a bitter disappointment to Caffyn.

He quite gasped when Mark said, with a frank unconsciousness, and without waiting for the subject to be introduced by him, 'Oh, I say, Caffyn, what on earth made you think poor old Vincent was going back to India at once? He's not going to do anything of the kind; he's wandering about the Continent. We knocked up against him at Laufenburg!'

Caffyn gave a searching look at Mabel's sweet, tranquil face, then at Mark's, which bore no sign of guilt or confusion. 'Knocked up against you!' he repeated; 'why—why, didn't he *expect* to find you there, then?'

Mabel answered this: 'It was quite an accident that he stopped at Laufenburg at all,' she said; 'he was going on to Italy.'

Caffyn did not give up even then—he tried one last probe. 'Of course,' he said; 'I forgot, your husband kept him so completely in the dark about it all—eh, Mark? Why, when you got him to come down to Wastwater with me, he had no idea what festivities were in preparation—had he?'

'No, my boy,' said Mark, with a perfectly natural and artistic laugh; 'I really don't believe he had—you mustn't be shocked, darling,' he added to Mabel; 'it was all for his good, poor fellow. I must tell you some day about our little conspiracy. It's all very well for you, though,' he turned to Caffyn again, 'to put it all on to me—you had more to do with it than I—it was your own idea, you know!'

'Oh!' said Caffyn; 'well, if you like to put it in that way——' He lost his self-possession completely—there was something in all this he could not at all understand.

The fact was that Mark felt himself able now to face the whole world with equanimity; the knowledge that no one would ever detect him made him a consummate actor. He had long made up his mind how he would greet Caffyn

when they met again, and he was delighted to find himself so composed and equal to the occasion.

Caffyn stood looking after the carriage as it drove away with them; he had quite lost his bearings: the paper in Holroyd's hand, Mark's own behaviour in so many instances, Vincent's rapid pursuit, had all seemed to point so clearly to one conclusion—yet what was he to think now? He began for the first time to distrust his own penetration; he very much feared that his elaborate scheme of revenge was a failure, that he must choose some other means of humbling Mabel, and must begin all over again, which was a distressing thought to a young man in his situation. He was glad now that he had never talked of his suspicions, and had done nothing openly compromising. He would not give up even yet, until he had seen Holroyd, and been able to pump him judiciously; until then he must bear the dismal suspicion that he had overreached himself.

One of his shafts at least had not fallen altogether wide, for as Mark and Mabel were being driven home across the Park, she said suddenly: 'So *Harold* knew that Vincent was alive, then?'

'Yes,' said Mark, '*he* knew,' and he looked out of the window at the sunset as he spoke.

'And you and Harold kept him from hearing of our wedding?' she said. 'Mark, I thought you said that you had told him?'

'Oh, no,' said Mark; 'you misunderstood. There—there were reasons.'

'Tell me them,' said Mabel.

'Well,' said Mark, 'Vincent was ill—anyone could see that what he wanted was rest, and that the fatigue and—and—the excitement of a wedding would be too much for him—Caffyn wanted a companion up at Wastwater, and begged me to say nothing about our marriage just then, and leave it to him to tell him quietly later on—that's all, darling.'

'I don't like it, dear,' said Mabel; 'I don't like your joining Harold in a thing like that. I know you did it all for the best, but I don't see why you could not have told him; if he was not well enough to come to the wedding we should have understood it!'

'Perhaps you're right,' said Mark, easily, 'but, at all events, no harm has come of it to anybody. How they are thinning the trees along here, aren't they? Just look down that avenue!'

And Mabel let him turn the conversation from a subject she was glad enough to forget.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

LITTLE RIFTS.

One bright morning in May, not long after the return from the Continent, Mabel was sitting in her own room at the back of the small house which had been taken on Campden Hill; she was writing at a table by the raised window, when the door opened suddenly, and Mark burst in, in a state of suppressed but very evident excitement. 'I have brought you something!' he said, and threw down three peacock-blue volumes upon her open blotting-case; the title, 'Sweet Bells Jangled,' ran in sprawling silver letters from corner to corner of the covers, through a medley of cracked bells and withered hyacinths in dull gold; the general effect being more bold than pleasing. Mabel was just about to exclaim sympathetically, 'What a frightful binding they've given you, dear;' when Mark informed her, with some complacency, that it was his own design. 'Nowadays, you see,' he explained, 'you want something to catch the eye, or you won't be read!' Inwardly Mabel could not help wondering that he could condescend to such a device or think it necessary in his own case. 'Look at the fly-leaf,' he said, and she opened the first volume, and read the printed dedication, '*To My Wife.*' 'I thought that must bring me luck,' he said; 'and now, darling, do you know what you are going to do? You are going to put away all those confounded letters and sit down here, and read the opening chapters carefully, and tell me what you think of them.' For till then he had made continual excuses for not showing her any portion of his new work, either in manuscript or proof, from mixed motives of vanity and diffidence.

Mabel laughed with affectionate pride at his anxiety: 'This is what comes of marrying a great author!' she said; 'go away and let me begin at once, and tell you at lunch how I enjoyed it.'

'No,' said Mark despotically, 'I'm going to stay here—or you might try to skip.'

'But I can't allow that,' she protested; 'suppose I find I'm obliged to

skip—suppose it's a terrible disappointment? No, you ridiculous Mark, I didn't mean it—stay if you like, I'm not afraid of being disappointed—though I really would enjoy it best in solitude!'

Mark insisted; he felt that at last he was about to be reinstated in his own opinion, he could wait no longer for the assurance of triumph; when he saw with his own eyes the effect of his genius upon Mabel, when he read the startled delight and growing admiration in her face, then at last he would know that he was not actually an impostor!

There are many methods of self-torture, but perhaps few more ingenious and protracted than submitting the result of one's brain-work to a person whose good opinion we covet, and watching the effect. Mark imposed it on himself, nevertheless, chiefly because in his heart he had very little fear of the result. He took a rocking-chair and sat down opposite Mabel, trying to read the paper; by-and-by, as she read on in silence, his heart began to beat and he rocked himself nervously, while his eyes kept wandering from the columns to the pretty hands supporting the volume which hid Mabel's face. Hands reveal many things, and Mabel's could be expressive enough at times—but they told him nothing then; he watched them turn a leaf from time to time, they always did so deliberately, almost caressingly, he thought, but with no eagerness—although the opening was full of incident. He calculated that she must be at a place where there was a brilliant piece of humorous description; she had a fair share of humour—why didn't she laugh?

'Have you got to that first appearance of the curate on the tennis-ground?' he asked at last.

She laid down the volume for an instant, and he saw her eyes—they were calm and critical. 'Past that! I am beginning Chapter Three,' she said.

The second chapter had contained some of his most sparkling and rollicking writing—and it had not even moved her to smile! He consoled himself with the reflection that the robuster humour never does appeal to women. He had begun his third chapter with a ludicrous anecdote which, though it bordered on the profane, he had considered too good to be lost, but now he had misgivings.

'I'm afraid,' he ventured dubiously, 'you won't quite like that bit about the bishop, darling?'

'I'm afraid I don't quite,' she replied from behind the book. The story had no real harm in it, even in Mabel's eyes; the only pity was that in any part of 'Illusion' it would have been an obvious blot—and that it did not seem out of keeping in the pages she was reading now.

She had sat down to read with such high hopes, so sure an anticipation of real enjoyment, that it was hard to find that the spell was broken; she tried to believe that she read on because she was interested—her real reason was a dread of some pause, when she would be asked to give her opinion. What should she say?

Perhaps it should be explained at once that the book was not a foolish one; Mark, whatever else he was, could scarcely be called a fool, and had a certain share of the literary faculty; it was full of smart and florid passages that had evidently been industriously polished, and had something of the perishable brilliancy of varnish. There is a kind of vulgarity of mind so subtle as to resist every test but ink, and the cheap and flashy element in Mark's nature had formed a deposit, slight, perhaps, but perceptible, in more than one page of 'Sweet Bells Jangled.' Mabel felt her heart grow heavier as she read. Why had he chosen to deliberately lower his level like this? Where were the strong and masterly touch, the tenderness and the dignity of his first book? That had faults, too, even faults of taste—but here the faults had almost overgrown the taste! Surely if she read on, she would find the style attain the old distinction, and the tone grow noble and tender once again—but she read on, and the style was always the same, and the tone, if anything, rather worse!

Mark had long since moved to a spot where he could command her face; her fine eyebrows were slightly drawn, her long lashes lowered, and her mouth compressed as if with pain—somehow the sight did not encourage him. She was becoming conscious that her expression was being closely watched, which seldom adds a charm to reading, and at last she could persevere no longer, and shut the book with a faint sigh.

'Well,' said Mark, desperately; he felt as if his fate hung on her answer.

'I—I—have read so little yet,' she said; 'let me tell you what I think at the end!'

'Tell me what you think of it so far,' said Mark.

'*Must* I?' she said, almost imploringly.

'Yes,' said Mark, with a grating attempt at a laugh; 'put me out of my misery!'

She loved him too well to make some flattering or evasive reply—she was jealous for his reputation, and could not see him peril it without a protest.

'Oh, Mark,' she cried, locking her hands and pressing them tight together, 'you must feel yourself—it is not your best—you have done such great work—you will again, I know, dear—but this, it is not worthy of you—it is not worthy of "Illusion!"'

He knew too well that it was his best, that it was not in him to do better; if the world's verdict agreed with hers, he was a failure indeed. He had been persuading himself that, after all, he was not a common impostor, that he had genius of his own which would be acknowledged far above his friend's talent; now all at once the conviction began to crumble.

He turned upon her with a white face and a look of anger and mortification in his eyes. 'The first is always the best, of course,' he said bitterly; 'that is the regulation verdict. If "Sweet Bells" had come first, and "Illusion" second, you would have seen this sad falling off in the *second* book. I did not think *you* would be the first to take up that silly old cry, Mabel—I thought I could always come to my wife for encouragement and appreciation; it seems I was mistaken!'

Mabel bit her lip, and her eyes were dazzled for a moment: 'You asked me what I thought,' she said in a low voice; 'do you think it was pleasant to tell you? When you ask me again, I shall know better how you expect to be answered!'

He felt all at once what he had done, and hastened to show his penitence; she forgave, and did not let him see how deeply she had been wounded—only from that day some of the poetry of her life had turned to prose. Of 'Sweet Bells Jangled' she never spoke again, and he did not know whether she ever read it to the end or not.

They had finished breakfast one Saturday morning, and Mark was leisurely cutting the weekly reviews, when he suddenly sheltered himself behind the paper he had been skimming—'Sweet Bells' was honoured with a long notice. His head swam as he took in the effect with some effort. The critic was not one of those fallen angels of literature who rejoice over an unexpected recruit; he wrote with a kindly recollection of 'Illusion,' and his condemnation was sincerely reluctant; still, it was unmixed condemnation, and ended with an exhortation to the author to return to the 'higher and more artistic aims' of his first work. Mark's hand shook till the paper rustled when he came to that; he was so long silent that Mabel looked up from reading her letters, and asked if the new book was reviewed yet.

'Reviewed yet!' said Mark from behind the article; 'why, it hasn't been out a fortnight.'

'I know,' said Mabel, 'but I thought perhaps that, after "Illusion"——'

'Every book has to wait its turn!' said Mark, as he saved himself with all the reviews, and locked himself in the little study where he sketched out the stories to which he had not as yet found appropriate endings.

There was another notice amongst the reviews, but in that the critic was relentless in pointing out that the whilom idol had feet of clay—and enormous ones; after a very severe elaboration of the faults, the critic concluded: 'It almost seems as though the author, weary of the laudation which accompanied the considerable (if, in some degree, accidental) success of his first book, had taken this very effectual method of rebuking the enthusiasm. However this may be, one more such grotesque and ill-considered production as that under review, and we can promise him an instant cessation of all the inconveniences of popularity.'

Mark crumpled up the paper and pitched it to the other end of the room in a fury—it was a conspiracy, they were writing him down—oh, the malice and cowardice of it! He destroyed both reviews lest Mabel should see her opinion confirmed, and her faith in him should be shaken.

However, sundry copies of the reviews in question were forwarded to him by good-natured people who thought it might amuse him to see them, and one was even sent to Mabel with red chalk crosses in thoughtful indication of the more unpleasant passages; she saw the date, and remembered it as the day on which Mark had fenced himself in at breakfast. She came in with the paper as he sat in his study, and putting one hand on his shoulder, bent over him with a loving reproach in her eyes: 'Some-'one has just sent me this,' she said; 'you have seen it, I know. Why didn't

you trust me, dear? Why have you let this come from others. Never try to hide things from me again, Mark—not even for my good! and—and after this let us share everything—sorrow and all—together!' She kissed him once on the forehead, and left him there to his own thoughts.

Why, thought Mabel, was he not strong enough to disregard criticism if he was satisfied with his own work, as he evidently was? She hated to think of his having tried to keep these notices from her in that weak, almost underhand, way; she knew that the motive was not consideration for her feelings, and had to admit sadly that her hero was painfully human after all.

Still, 'Illusion' had revealed a nature the nobility of which no weaknesses could obscure; and if his daily life did not quite bear out such indications, he was Mark Ashburn, and she loved him. Nothing could alter that.

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Some weeks later Vincent returned from Italy, and one of the first persons he met was Harold Caffyn. It was in the City, where Vincent had had business, and he attempted at first to pass the other by with the curtest possible recognition; he had never understood his conduct in the Wastwater episode, and still resented it. But Caffyn would not allow himself to be cut, and his greeting was blandly affectionate as he accused his friend of abandoning him up in the Lake district; he was determined, if he could, to convince Holroyd that his silence as to Mabel's impending marriage had been due solely to consideration for his feelings, and then, when confidence was restored, he could sound him upon the result of his journey to Laufenburg. But Vincent, from a vague feeling of distrust, was on his guard. Caffyn got nothing out of him, even by the most ingenious pumping; he gathered that he had met Mark at Laufenburg; but with all his efforts he was not able to discover if that meeting had really been by accident or design. He spoke casually of 'Illusion,' but Vincent showed no particular emotion.

'I suppose you don't know,' he added, 'that Mrs. Featherstone has done it the honour of making a play of it—it's going to be done at the end of the season at their house, before a select party of distinguished sufferers.'

Holroyd had not heard that.

'I've been let in for it,' Caffyn continued; 'I'm playing that stick of a poet—Julian, the beggar's name is; it's my last appearance on the boards, till I come out as Benedick—but that won't interest you, and it's a sort of secret at present.'

Vincent was not curious, and asked no questions.

'Who do you think is to be the Beaumelle, though?' said Caffyn; 'the author's own wife! Romantic that, eh? She's not half bad at rehearsals; you must come and see us, my boy!'

'Perhaps I shall,' said Vincent, mechanically, and left him, as much at fault as ever, but resolved to have patience still.

Caffyn's was a nature that liked tortuous ways for their own sake; he had kept his suspicions to himself hitherto, he was averse to taking any direct action until he was quite sure of his ground. He had those papers in Holroyd's writing, it was true, but he had begun to feel that they were not evidence enough to act on. If by some extraordinary chance they were quite compatible with Mark's innocence, then if he brought a charge against him, or if any slanderous insinuations were traced to him, he would be placed in an extremely awkward and invidious position. 'If I'm right,' he thought, 'Master Vincent's playing some deep game of his own—it may be mine for all I know; at all events, I'll lie low till I can find out where the cards are, and whether an ace or two has got up my sleeve.'

Vincent had been able to speak with perfect calmness of his lost book, because he had almost brought himself to a philosophic indifference regarding it, the more easily as he had had consoling indications lately that his creative power had not been exhausted with that one effort, and that with returning health he might yet do good work in the world.

But now, as he walked on after leaving Caffyn, this indifference suddenly vanished; his heart beat with a secret and exquisite bliss, as he thought of this play in which Mabel was to represent his own heroine. To hear that his work was to receive the rather moderate distinction which can be conferred by its dramatisation on a private stage would scarcely have elated him under ordinary circumstances; it was no longer any concern of his at all. Still he could not resist the subtle flattery in the knowledge that his conception was about to be realised in a manner for which few