

Anstey F.

The Giant's Robe



F. Anstey

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PREFACE

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

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

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

CHAPTER I. AN INTERCESSOR

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'What can I do?' asked Mark.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Why,' said Mark, 'the fact is, I –'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For Mark had always longed for renown of some sort, and for the last few years literary distinction had seemed the most open to him. He had sought it by more ambitious attempts, but even the laurels which the performance of a piece of his by boy-actors on a Speech-day might bring him

had become desirable; and though he had written and submitted his work confidently and carelessly enough, he found himself not a little anxious and excited as the time for a decision drew near.

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

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

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

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

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

'You know the way, I believe? If not, I can show you,' said the old gentleman politely.

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

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

It is not improbable that Langton *was* going to lie that time – his code allowed it – but he felt checked somehow. 'Well, I only know the fellow by name,' he said at last.

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

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

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

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

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

'Yes, when I've done nothing.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Whatever he thought of, he was too engaged to notice Mark, who followed him with his eyes as he slowly worked his way up the flight of stone steps which led to the street level. 'Shall I ever come to that?' he thought. 'If I stay here all my life, I *may*. Ah, there's Gilbertson – he can tell me about this Speech-day business.'

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

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

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

'And – my little production?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hitherto Mark's life had contained more of failure than success. From St. Peter's he had gone to a crammer's to be prepared for the Indian Civil Service, and an easy pass had been anticipated for him even at the first trial. Unfortunately, however, his name came out low down on the list – a disaster

which he felt must be wiped out at all hazards, and, happening to hear of an open scholarship that was to be competed for at a Cambridge college, he tried for it, and this time was successful. A well-to-do uncle, who had undertaken the expenses hitherto, was now induced to consent to the abandonment of the Civil Service in favour of a University career, and Mark entered upon it accordingly with fair prospects of distinction, if he read with even ordinary steadiness.

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

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

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

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

But all this had only fanned his ambition. He would show the world there was something in him still; and he began to send up articles to various London magazines, and to keep them going like a juggler's oranges, until his productions obtained a fair circulation, in manuscript.

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

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

CHAPTER II. A LAST WALK

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They passed out through the dingy, gas-lit clerk's room, and Holroyd stopped for a minute to speak to the clerk, a mild, pale man, who was neatly copying out an opinion at the foot of a case. 'Good-bye, Tucker,' he said, 'I don't suppose I shall see you again for some time.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'I never got up,' said Holroyd, with a rather melancholy grimace. 'I began well enough. I used to come up to chambers by ten and leave at half-past six, after noting up reports and text-books all day; but no solicitor seemed struck by my industry. Then I sat in court and took down judgments most elaborately, but no leader ever asked *me* to take notes for him, and I never got a chance of suggesting anything to the court as *amicus curiae*, for both the Vice-Chancellors seemed able to get along pretty well without me. Then I got tired of that, and somehow this book got into my head, and I couldn't rest till I'd got it out again. It's finished now, and I'm lonely again.'

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

'Not quite that,' said Holroyd; 'it must stand as it is. What I'm going to ask you is this: I don't know any fellow I would care to ask but yourself. I want it published. I shall be out of England,

probably with plenty of other matters to occupy me for some time. I want you to look after the manuscript for me while I'm away. Do you mind taking the trouble?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Well,' said Mark, stopping, 'I suppose you turn off here?' Holroyd would have been willing to go on with him as far as Kensington had Mark proposed it, but he gave no sign of desiring this, so his friend's pride kept him silent too.

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

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

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

'Just as you please; but why?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER III. GOOD-BYE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Will you answer if I do?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'If I do that, it is only because I see nothing else to do. But I am ambitious still, Mabel. I shall not be content with that, if a certain venture of mine is successful enough to give me hopes of anything better. But it's a very big "if" at present.'

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

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

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

If he had been able to tell her then of his book, and his plans respecting it, Mabel might have looked upon him with a new interest, and much that followed in her life might have been prevented. But he hesitated for a moment, and while he hesitated a second interruption took place. The opportunity was gone, and, like most opportunities in conversation, once missed was gone for ever. The irrepressible Dolly was the innocent instrument: she came in with a big portfolio of black and white papers, which she put down on a chair. 'I can't find the metronome anywhere, Fräulein,' she said. 'I've been talking to Colin: he wants you to come and say good-bye before you go, Vincent.'

Colin says he nearly got "swished" to-day, only his master begged him off because he'd done nothing at all really. Wasn't it nice of him? Ask him to tell you about it. Oh, and, Vincent, I want your head for my album. May I cut it out?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'My dear Vincent,' she said, holding out both her hands, 'so you've come after all. Really, I was quite afraid you'd forgotten us. Why didn't somebody tell me Vincent was here, Mabel? I would have hurried over my dressing to come down. It's so very provoking, Vincent, but I have to say good-bye in a hurry. My husband and I are going out to dinner, and he wouldn't come home to change, so he will dress at his chambers, and I have to go up and fetch him. And it's so late, and they dine so ridiculously early where we're going, and he's sure to keep me waiting such a time, I mustn't lose another minute. Will you see me to the carriage, Vincent? Thanks. Has Marshall put the footwarmer in, and is the druggie down? Then we'll go, please; and I wish you every success in – over there, you know, and you must be careful of yourself and bring home a nice wife. – Lincoln's Inn, tell him, please. – Good-bye, Vincent, good-bye!'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Is Harold going?' said Dolly.

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

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

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

His face clouded, however, when Mabel said 'Don't ring, Ottilia. I will go to the door with Vincent – it's the last time.' 'I wonder if she cares about the fellow!' he thought uneasily.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'You are very fond of calling other people dull, Harold,' said Mabel, with a displeased contraction of her eyebrows. 'Vincent is not in the least dull: you only speak of him like that because you don't understand him.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER IV. MALAKOFF TERRACE

AFTER parting from Vincent at the end of Rotten Row, Mark Ashburn continued his walk alone through Kensington High Street and onwards, until he came to one of those quiet streets which serve as a sort of backwater to the main stream of traffic, and, turning down this, it was not long before he reached a row of small three-story houses, with their lower parts cased in stucco, but the rest allowed to remain in the original yellow-brown brick, which time had mellowed to a pleasant warm tone. 'Malakoff Terrace,' as the place had been christened (and the title was a tolerable index of its date), was rather less depressing in appearance than many of its more modern neighbours, with their dismal monotony and pretentiousness. It faced a well-kept enclosure, with trim lawns and beds, and across the compact laurel hedges in the little front gardens a curious passer-by might catch glimpses of various interiors which in nearly every case left him with an impression of cosy comfort. The outline of the terrace was broken here and there by little verandahs protecting the shallow balconies and painted a deep Indian-red or sap-green, which in summer time were gay with flowers and creepers, and one seldom passed there then on warm and drowsy afternoons without undergoing a well-sustained fire from quite a masked battery of pianos, served from behind the fluttering white curtains at most of the long open windows on the first floor.

Even in winter and at night the terrace was cheerful, with its variety of striped and coloured blinds and curtains at the illuminated windows; and where blinds and curtains were undrawn and the little front rooms left unlighted, the firelight flickering within on shining bookcases and picture frames was no less pleasantly suggestive. Still, in every neighbourhood there will always be some houses whose exteriors are severely unattractive; without being poverty-stricken, they seem to belong to people indifferent to all but the absolutely essential, and incapable of surrounding themselves with any of the characteristic contrivances that most homes which are more than mere lodgings amass almost unconsciously. It was before a house of this latter kind that Mark stopped – a house with nothing in the shape of a verandah to relieve its formality. Behind its front railings there were no trim laurel bushes – only an uncomfortable bed of equal parts of mould and broken red tiles, in which a withered juniper was dying hard; at the windows were no bright curtain-folds or hanging baskets of trailing fern to give a touch of colour, but dusty wire blinds and hangings of a faded drab.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The beginning of this particular evening did not promise any marked increase in the general liveliness. Mrs. Ashburn announced lugubriously to all whom it might concern that she had eaten no lunch; Martha mentioned that a Miss Hornblower had called that afternoon – which produced no sensation, though Cuthbert seemed for a moment inclined to ask who Miss Hornblower might happen to be, till he remembered in time that he really did not care, and saved himself the trouble. Then Trixie made a well-meant, but rather too obvious, effort to allure him to talk by an inquiry (which had become something of a formula) whether he had 'seen any one' that day, to which Cuthbert replied that he had noticed one or two people hanging about the City; and Martha observed that she was glad to see he still kept up his jokes, moving him to confess sardonically that he knew he was a funny dog, but when he saw them all – and particularly Martha – rollicking round him, he could not help bubbling over with merriment himself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Trixie was a handsome girl of about eighteen, with abundant auburn hair, which was never quite in good order, and pretty hands of which most girls would have been more careful; she had developed a limp taste for art of late, finding drawing outlines at an art school less irksome than assisting in the housekeeping at home. Uncle Solomon always alarmed her because she never knew what he would say next; but as it was a family rule to be civil to him, she made room for him with great apparent alacrity.

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

a blush if I looked! Who is it now, Trixie, and where do we meet him, and when is the wedding? Come, tell your old uncle.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was a 'sensation,' as reporters say, at this announcement: Martha gave a sour little laugh of disgust; Cuthbert looked as if he thought a good deal which brotherly feeling forbade him to put in words; but Trixie tried to take Mark's hand under the table – he shrank from all sympathy, however,

at such a moment, and shook her off impatiently, and all she could do was to keep her eyes in pity from his face.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Upstairs in his room he got out his few elementary text-books, and began to read with a sort of sullen determination; but he had not gone very far in the 'descent of an estate-tail,' before he shut the book up in a passion: 'I can't read to-night,' he said savagely; 'it isn't easy to hug my chains all at once; it will be a long time before I come out strong on estates-tail. If Holroyd (who says he *likes* the jargon) can't get a living by it, there's not much hope for me. I loathe it! I'm sure I had a chance with those books of mine, too; but that's all over. I must burn them, I suppose – Who's there?' for there was a tap at the door.

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

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

'You mustn't be angry with them,' said Trixie. 'Dear ma is very strict; but then she is so anxious to see you making a living, Mark, and you know they don't give you very much at St. Peter's. And

Martha and Cuthbert can't help saying disagreeable things. Don't you think, perhaps,' she added timidly, 'that it's better for you to give up thinking about writing any more?'

'Well, I've done it, Trixie, at any rate. I'm not so bad as that fellow Delobelle, in "Fromont Jeune," with his "Je n'ai pas le droit de renoncer au théâtre!" am I? I've renounced *my* stage. I'm a good little boy, and won't make a mess with nasty ink and pens any more. When I get those confounded books back they shall go into the fire – by Jove they shall!'

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER V. NEIGHBOURS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'As a saint?' suggested Mark.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Which young ladies?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

They dined in a warm little room, furnished plainly but well; and after dinner Uncle Solomon gave Mark a cigar, and took down a volume of American Commentaries on the Epistles, which he used to give a Sunday tone to his nap; but before it could take effect, there were sounds faintly audible through the closed windows, as of people talking at the end of the grounds.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At this point Mark could not resist a glance at the fair face across the fence. In spite of her feminine compassion for the bird and respect for its proprietor, Mabel had not been able to overcome a sense of the absurdity of the scene, with the two angry old gentlemen wrangling across the fence over an intoxicated gander; the face Mark saw was rippling with subdued amusement, and her dark grey eyes met his for an instant with an electric flash of understanding; then she turned away with a slight increase of colour in her cheeks. 'I'm going in, Uncle Anthony,' she said; 'do come, too, as soon as you can; don't quarrel about it any more – ask them to give you back the poor goose, and I'll take it into the yard again; it ought to go at once.'

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

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

At this the gander lurched against a half-buried flower pot, and rolled helplessly over with its eyes closed. 'Oh, the poor thing,' cried Mabel, 'it's dying!'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mark thought it had gone far enough. He took up the heavy bird, which made some maudlin objections, and carried it gingerly to the fence. 'Here's the victim, Mr. Humpage,' he said lightly.

'I think it will be itself again in a couple of hours or so. And now, perhaps, we can let the matter drop for the present.'

The old gentleman glared at Mark as he received his bird: 'I don't know who you may be, young sir, or what share you've had in this disgraceful business. If I trace it to you, you shall repent of it, I promise you! I don't wish to have any further communication with you or your friend, who's old enough to know his duty better as a neighbour and a Christian. You will let him know, with my compliments, that he'll hear more of this.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER VI. SO NEAR AND YET SO FAR

WHEN Mark awoke next morning the weather had undergone one of those sudden and complete changes which form one of the chief attractions of our climate; there had been a frost, and with it a thin white mist, which threw its clinging veil over the landscape; the few trees which were near enough to be seen were covered with a kind of thick grey vegetation, that gave them a spectral resemblance to their summer selves. Breakfast was early, as Mark had to be down at St. Peter's as soon after morning chapel as possible, and he came down shivering to find his uncle already seated. 'The dog-cart will be round in five minutes,' said the latter gentleman, with his mouth full; 'so make the most of your time. You'll have a cold drive. I'll take you over to the station myself, and go on and see Ferret after.'

The too-zealous Wilcox brought the trap round. 'Ave you been round to see about that bird next door?' Mr. Lightowler asked rather anxiously, as the man stood by the mare's head. 'Yessir,' said Wilcox, with a grin; 'I went and saw Mr. 'Umpage's man, and he say the old gander was werry bad when they got 'im 'ome, but he ain't any the worse for what he 'ad this mornin', sir; though the man, he dew say as the gander seem a bit sorry for 'isself tew. They tough old birds 'a' got strong 'eads, sir; I knowed it 'ud do him no 'arm, bless ye!'

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

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

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

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

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

'Sharp morning this to stand about in,' said Uncle Solomon; 'let's go into the waiting-room, there's a fire there.' The waiting-room was the usual drab little room, with a bottle of water and tumblers on a bare stained table, and local advertisements on the dingy walls; the gas was lighted, and flickered in a sickly white fishtail flame, but the fire was blazing cheerfully, giving a sheen to the

silver-grey fur of a child in a crimson plush hat who stood before it embracing a small round basket out of which a Skye terrier's head was peering inquisitively.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dolly was evidently about to inquire searchingly into the nature of this local phenomenon, but before she could begin the old gentleman turned and saw that they were not alone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER VII. IN THE FOG

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was the usual obstructive person in the train who required to be logically convinced first of the necessity for disturbing himself; he put his head angrily out of a window near Mark's: 'Here, guard!' he shouted importantly; 'what's all this? *Why* am I to get out?' 'Because you'd better,' said the guard, shortly. 'But why – where's the platform? I insist on being taken to a platform – I'm not going to break my leg getting out here.' Several people, who had half opened their doors, paused on the steps at this, as if recalled to a sense of their personal dignity. 'Do as you please, sir,' said the official; 'the engine's broke down, and we may be run into any minute in this fog; but if you'd be more comfortable up there – ' There was no want of alacrity after that, the obstructive man being the first down; all the rosy-faced gentlemen hopped out, some of the younger ones still grasping half-played hands of 'Nap' or 'Loo,' and made the best of their way down the embankment, and several old ladies were got out in various stages of flutter, narrowly escaping sprained ankles in the descent.

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

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

Mabel turned a little pale, for she had not understood till then that there was any real danger. 'Keep close to me, Dolly,' she said, as they went down the slope; 'we're safe here.'

The fog had gathered thick down in the meadows, and nothing could be seen of the abandoned train when they had gone a few paces from the foot of the embankment; the passengers were moving about in excited groups, not knowing what horrors they might not be obliged to witness in the next few minutes. The excitement increased as one of them declared he could hear the noise of an approaching train. 'Only just in time – God help them if they don't pull up!' cried some, and a woman hoped that 'the poor driver and stoker were not on the engine.'

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

And, to Mark's horror, she turned back, evidently with the idea of making for the point of danger; he ran after her and caught the little silvery-grey form fast in his arms. 'Let me go!' cried Dolly, struggling; 'I must get him back – oh, I must!'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He went as directly as he could to the part of the train in which was the carriage he had occupied, and found it without much difficulty when he was near enough to make out forms through the fog; the door of Mabel's compartment was open, and, as he sprang up the footboard, he heard the train

behind rattling down on him with its whistle screeching infernally, and for the first time felt an uneasy recollection of the horribly fantastic injuries described in accounts of so many railway collisions.

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

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

The first thing they saw was a crowd of eager, excited faces, all questioning and accusing the badgered officials of both trains at the same time. 'Why was an empty train left on the rails unprotected in this way? they might have been all killed. – It was culpable negligence all round, and there should be an inquiry – they would insist on an inquiry – they would report this to the traffic manager,' and so on.

The faces looked pale and ghastly enough in the fog, but all the speakers were evidently sound in wind and limb, and, as far as could be seen, neither train had left the rails – but where was the young man who had volunteered to recover the dog? 'Oh, Mabel,' cried Dolly, again and again. 'Frisk is killed, I'm sure of it, or he'd come to me – something has happened – ask, do ask.'

But Mabel dared not, for fear of hearing that a life had been nobly and uselessly sacrificed; she could only press through the crowd with the object of making her way to the carriage where the suspense would be ended.

'There's someone in one of the carriages!' she heard a voice saying as she got nearer, and her heart beat faster; and then the crowd parted somehow, and she saw Mark Ashburn come out of it towards her, with a dazed, scared smile on his pale face, and the little trembling dog safe under one arm.

Fortunately for Mark, the fog-signals had been set in time to do their work, and the second train was fitted with powerful brakes which, but for the state of the rails, would have brought it to without any collision at all; as it was, the shock had not been severe enough to damage the rolling-stock to any greater extent than twisting or straining a buffer or coupling-chain here and there, though it had thrown him against the corner of the net-rail with sufficient violence to slightly graze his forehead, and leave him stunned and a little faint for a few moments.

After sitting down for a short time to recover himself, he picked up the terrier from the cushions on which it was crouching and shivering, having dropped from his hand at the concussion, and feeling himself still rather giddy and sick, got down amongst the astonished crowd, and came towards Mabel and Dolly as we have seen.

It was the best moment, as he thought afterwards, in his life. Every one, probably, with any imagination at all likes to conceive himself at times as the performer of some heroic action extorting the admiration he longs for from some particular pair of eyes, but opportunities for thus distinguishing oneself are sadly rare nowadays, and often when they come are missed, or, if grasped with success, the fair eyes are looking another way and never see it.

But Mark had a satisfied sense of appearing to the utmost advantage as he met the little girl and placed the dog in her arms. 'There's your dog; he's quite safe, only a little frightened,' he said, with a pleasant sympathy in his voice.

Dolly was too overcome for words; she caught Frisk up with her eyes swimming, and ran away with him to pour her self-reproach and relief into his pricked ears, without making any attempt to express her thanks to his rescuer. Her sister, however, made him ample amends.

'How can we thank you?' she said, with a quiver in her voice and an involuntary admiration in her eyes; 'it was so very, very brave of you – you might have been killed!'

'I thought at first it was going to be rather a bad smash,' said Mark – he could not resist the impulse now to make all the capital he could out of what he had done – 'I was knocked down – and – and unconscious for a little while after it; but I'm not much hurt, as you see. I don't *think* I'm any the worse for it, and at all events your little sister's dog isn't – and that's the main point, isn't it?' he added, with a feeling that his words were equal to the occasion.

'Indeed it isn't,' said Mabel warmly; 'if you had been seriously hurt I should never have forgiven myself for letting you go – but are you sure you feel no pain anywhere?'

'Well,' he admitted, 'I fancy I was cut a little about the head' (he was afraid she might not have noticed this), 'but that's a trifle.'

'There is a cut on your forehead,' said Mabel; 'it has been bleeding, but I think it has stopped now. Let me bind it up for you in case it should break out again.'

It was in truth a very small cut, and had hardly bled at all, but Mark made light of it elaborately, as the surest means of keeping her interest alive. 'I am afraid it must be giving you pain,' she said, with a pretty, anxious concern in her eyes as she spoke; and Mark protested that the pain was nothing – which was the exact truth, although he had no intention of being taken literally.

They had gone down the embankment again and were slowly crossing the dim field in which they had first taken refuge. No one was in sight, the other passengers being still engaged in comparing notes or browbeating the unhappy guards above; and as Mark glanced at his companion he saw that her thoughts had ceased to busy themselves about him, while her eyes were trying to pierce the gloom which surrounded her.

'I was looking for my little sister,' she exclaimed, answering the question in his eyes. 'She ran off with the dog you brought back to her, and it is so easy to lose oneself here. I must find out where she is – oh, you are ill!' she broke off suddenly, as Mark staggered and half fell.

'Only a slight giddiness,' he said; 'if – if I could sit down somewhere for a moment – is that a stile over there?'

'It looks like one. Can you get so far without help?' she said compassionately. 'Will you lean on me?'

He seemed to her like some young knight who had been wounded, as it were, in her cause, and deserved all the care she could give him.

'If you will be so very good,' said Mark. He felt himself a humbug, for he could have leaped the stile with ease at that very moment. He had very little excuse for practising in this way on her womanly sympathy, except that he dreaded to lose her just yet, and found such a subtle intoxication in being tended like this by a girl from whom an hour ago he had scarcely hoped to win another careless glance; if he exaggerated his symptoms, as it is to be feared he did, there may be some who will forgive him under the circumstances.

So he allowed Mabel to guide him to the stile, and sat down on one of its rotten cross-planks while she poured *eau-de-Cologne* or some essence of the kind on a handkerchief, and ordered him to bathe his forehead with it. They seemed isolated there together on the patch of hoary grass by a narrow black ditch half hidden in rank weeds, which alone could be distinguished in the prevailing yellowish whiteness, and Mark desired nothing better at that moment.

'I wonder,' said Mabel, 'if there's a doctor amongst the passengers. There must be, I should think. I am sure you ought to see one. Let me see if I can find one and bring him to you.'

But Mark declared he was quite himself again, and would have begged her not to leave him if he had dared; and as there really did not seem to be anything serious the matter, Mabel's uneasiness about Dolly returned. 'I can't rest till I find her,' she said, 'and if you really are strong again, will you help me? She cannot have gone very far.'

Mark, only too glad of any pretence to remain with her, volunteered willingly.

'Then will you go round the field that way,' she said, 'and I will go this, and we will meet here again?'

'Don't you think,' said Mark, who had not been prepared for this, 'that if – she might not know *me*, you see – I mean if I was not with you?'

'Yes, she will,' said Mabel impatiently; 'Dolly won't forget you after what you have done, and we are losing time. Go round by there, and call her now and then; if she is here she will come, and if not then we will try the next field.'

She went off herself as she spoke, and Mark had nothing for it but to obey, as she so evidently expected to be obeyed. He went round the field, calling out the child's name now and then, feeling rather forlorn and ridiculous as his voice went out unanswered on the raw air. Presently a burly figure, grotesquely magnified by the mist, came towards him, and resolved itself into an ordinary guard.

'You one of the gentlemen in my train, sir?' he said, 'the train as broke down, that is?'

'Yes,' said Mark; 'why?'

'Cause we've got the engine put to rights, sir; nothing much the matter with her, there wasn't, and we're goin' on directly, sir; I'm gettin' all my passengers together.'

Mark was in no hurry to leave that field, but his time was not his own; he ought to have been at St. Peter's long ago, and was bound to take the first opportunity of getting back. It would not be pleasant, as it was, to have to go and fetch down his class from the sixth form room, where the headmaster had probably given them a temporary asylum.

He had never forgotten a morning on which he had overslept himself, and the mortification he had felt at the Doctor's blandly polite but cutting reception of his apologies. He had a better excuse this time, but even that would not bear overtaking.

He hesitated a moment, however. 'I'll go in a minute,' he said, 'but there's a lady and a little girl with a dog somewhere about. They mustn't be left behind. Wait while I go and tell them, will you?'

'Never you fear, sir,' said the guard, 'we won't go without them, but I'll call 'em; they'll mind me more than they will you, beggin' your pardon, sir, and you'd better run on, as time's short, and keep places for 'em. You leave it all to me; I'll take care on 'em.'

Mark heard faint barks across the hedge in the direction Mabel had taken. The child was evidently found. The best thing, he thought, to do now was to secure an empty compartment, and with that idea, and perhaps a little from that instinctive obedience to anything in a uniform which is a characteristic of the average respectable Englishman, he let himself be persuaded by the guard, and went back to the train.

To his great joy he found that the compartment Mabel had occupied had no one in it; he stood waiting by the door for Mabel and her sister to come up, with eager anticipations of a delightful conclusion to his journey. 'Perhaps she will tell me who she is,' he thought; 'at all events she will ask me who *I* am. How little I hoped for this yesterday!'

He was interrupted by a guard – another guard, a sour-looking man with a grizzled beard, who was in charge of the front van. 'Get in, sir, if you mean to travel by this 'ere train,' he said.

'I'm waiting for a young lady,' said Mark, rather ingenuously, but it slipped out almost without his knowledge. 'The other guard promised me –'

'I don't know nothing about no young ladies,' said the guard obdurately; 'but if you mean my mate, he's just give me the signal from his end, and if you don't want to be left be'ind you'd better take your seat while you can, sir, and pretty sharp, too.'

There was nothing else to do; he could not search for Mabel along the train; he must wait till they got to King's Cross; but he took his seat reluctantly and with a heavy disappointment, thinking what a fool he had been to let himself be persuaded by the burly guard. 'But for that, *she* might have been sitting opposite to me now!' he thought bitterly. 'What a fool I was to leave her. How pretty she looked when she wanted me to see a doctor; how charming she is altogether! Am I in love with her

already? Of course I am; who wouldn't be? I shall see her again. She will speak to me once more, and, after all, things might be worse. I couldn't have counted on *that* when we started.'

And he tried to console himself with this, feeling an impatient anger at the slow pace of the train as it crept cautiously on towards the goal of his hopes. But the breakdown had not happened very far from town, and, tedious as the time seemed to Mark, it was not actually long before the colour of the atmosphere (there was no other indication) proved that they were nearing the terminus.

It changed by slow gradations from its original yellow-whiteness to mustard colour, from that to a smoky lurid red, and from red to stinging, choking iron-grey, and the iron-grey pall was in full possession of King's Cross, where the sickly moonlight of the electric lamps could only clear small halos immediately around their globes.

Mark sprang out before the train had stopped; he strained his eyes in watching for the form he hoped to see there, but in vain; there were no signs in all that bustle of Mabel or Dolly, or the little dog to whom he owed so much.

He sought out the guard who had deluded him and found him superintending the clearing of the luggage van. He hardly knew whether it was merely a fancy that the official, after making a half-step forward to meet him, and fumbling in all his pockets, turned away again as if anxious to avoid meeting his eye.

Mark forced him to meet him, however, willing or not. 'Where is the lady?' he said sharply. 'You left her behind after all, it seems?'

'It wasn't my fault, sir,' said the guard wheezily, 'nor it wasn't the lady's fault, leastways on'y the little lady's, sir. Both on us tried all we could, but the little missy, her with the tarrier dawg, was nervous-like with it all, and wouldn't hear of getting in the train again; so the young lady, she said, seeing as they was so near London, they could get a fly or a cab or summat, and go on in that.'

'And – did she give you no message for me?' said Mark.

There was such evident expectation in his face that the guard seemed afraid to disappoint it. 'I was to give you her respects and compliments,' he said slowly – 'or was it her love, now?' he substituted quickly, after a glance at Mark's face, 'and you was not to be in a way about her, and she'd be seein' of you again before very long, and –'

'That's all a lie, you know,' said Mark, calmly.

'Well, then, she didn't say nothing, if that warn't it,' said the guard, doggedly.

'Did she – did she leave any directions about luggage or anything?' said Mark.

'Brown portmanty to go in the left-luggage room till called for,' said the guard. 'Anything else I can do for you, sir; no? Good mornin', then, and thanky, sir!'

'Never did such a thing as that in my life afore,' he muttered, as he went back to his van; 'to go and lose a bit o' paper with writing on it, d'reckly I got it, too; I'm afraid my head's a-leavin' me; they ain't keepin' company, that's plain. I made a mess o' that, or he wouldn't have wanted her direction. I saw what he was up to – well, they'd make a good-looking pair. I'm sorry I lost that there paper; but it warn't no use a-tellin' of him.'

As for Mark, this lame and impotent conclusion brought back all his depression again. 'She never even asked my name!' he thought, bitterly. 'I risked my life for her – it *was* for her, and she knew it: but she has forgotten that already. I've lost her for ever this time; she may not even live in London, and if she did I've no clue to tell me where, and if I had I don't exactly see what use it would be; I won't think about her – yes, I will, she can't prevent me from doing that, at any rate!'

By this time he had left the City station of the Metropolitan Railway, and was going back to his underground labours at St. Peter's, where he was soon engaged in trying to establish something like discipline in his class, which the dark brown fog seemed to have inspired with unaccountable liveliness. His short holiday had not served to rest and invigorate him as much as might have been expected; it had left him consumed with a hopeless longing for something unattainable. His thirst for distinction had returned in an aggravated form, and he had cut himself off now from the only means

of slaking it. As that day wore on, and with each day that succeeded it, he felt a wearier disgust with himself and his surroundings.

CHAPTER VIII.

BAD NEWS

IT was Christmas week, and Mrs. Langton and her daughters were sitting, late one afternoon, in the drawing-room where we saw them first. Dolly was on a low stool at her mother's feet, submitting, not too willingly, to have the bow in her hair smoothed and arranged for her. 'It *must* be all right now, mother!' she said, breaking away rebelliously at last.

'It's worse than ever, Dolly,' said Mrs. Langton plaintively; 'it's slipped over to the left now!'

'But it doesn't matter, it never will keep straight long.'

'Well, if you *like* to run about like a little wild child,' was the resigned answer.

'Little wild children don't wear bows in their hair; they wear – well, they don't wear anything they've got to be careful and tidy about. I think that must be rather nice,' said Dolly, turning round from where she knelt on the hearthrug. 'Wake up, Frisk, and be good-tempered directly. Mother, on Christmas Day I'm going to tie a Christmas card round Frisk's neck, and send him into papa's dressing-room to wish him a Merry Christmas, the first thing in the morning – you won't tell him before the time, will you?'

'Not if you don't wish it, darling,' said Mrs. Langton, placidly.

'I mightn't have had him to tie a card to,' said Dolly, taking the dog up and hugging him fondly, 'if that gentleman had not fetched him out of the train for me; and I never said "thank you" to him either. I forgot somehow, and when I remembered he was gone. Should you think he will come to see me, Mabel; you told him that mother would be glad to thank him some time, didn't you, on the paper you gave the guard for him?'

'Yes, Dolly,' said Mabel, turning her head a little away; 'but you see he hasn't come yet.'

'My dear,' said her mother, 'really I think he shows better taste in keeping away; there was no necessity to send him a message at all, and I hope he won't take any advantage of it. Thanking people is so tiresome and, after all, they never think you have said enough about it. It was very kind of the young man, of course, very – though I can't say I ever quite understood what it was he did – it was something in a fog, I know,' she concluded vaguely.

'We told you all about it, mother,' explained Dolly; 'I'll tell you all over again. There was a fog and our train stopped, and we all got out, and I left Frisk behind, and there he was in the carriage all alone, and then the gentleman ran back and got him out and brought him to me. And another train came up behind and stopped too.'

'Dolly tells it rather tamely,' said Mabel, her cheeks flushing again. 'At the time he ran back for the dog, we could all hear the other train rushing up in the fog, mamma, and nobody knew whether there might not be a frightful collision in another minute.'

'Then I think it was an extremely rash thing for him to do, my dear; and if I were his mother I should be very angry with him.'

'He was very good-looking, wasn't he, Mabel?' said Dolly, irrelevantly.

'Was he, Dolly? Well, yes, I suppose he was, rather,' said Mabel, with much outward indifference, and an inward and very vivid picture of Mark's face as he leaned by the stile, his fine eyes imploring her not to leave him.

'Well, perhaps, he doesn't care about being thanked, or doesn't want to see us again,' said Dolly; 'if he did, he'd call, you know; you wrote the address on the paper.'

Mabel had already arrived at the same conclusion, and was secretly a little piqued and hurt by it; she had gone slightly out of her way to give him an opportunity of seeing her again if he wished, and he had not chosen to take advantage of it; it had not seriously disturbed her peace of mind, but her pride was wounded notwithstanding. At times she was ready to believe that there had been some

mistake or miscarriage with her message, otherwise it was strange that the admiration which it had not been difficult to read in his eyes should have evaporated in this way.

'Why, here's papa – home already!' cried Dolly, as the door opened and a tall man entered. 'How do you do, papa? you've rumpled my bow – you didn't think I *meant* it, did you? you can do it again if you like —I don't mind a bit; mother does.'

He had duly returned the affectionate hug with which Dolly had greeted him, but now he put her aside with a rather preoccupied air, and went to his wife's chair, kissing the smooth forehead she presented, still absently.

'You are early, Gerald,' she said; 'did the courts rise sooner to-day?'

'No,' he said conscientiously, 'it's the Vacation now – I left chambers as soon as I could get away,' and he was folding and unfolding the evening paper he had brought in with him, as he stood silent before the fire.

Mr. Langton was not much over fifty, and a handsome man still, with full clear eyes, a well-cut chin and mouth, iron-grey whiskers, and a florid complexion which years spent in stifling law-courts and dust and black laden chambers had not done much to tone down. Young barristers and solicitors' clerks were apt to consider him rather a formidable personage in Lincoln's Inn; and he was certainly imposing as he rustled along New Square or Chancery Lane, his brows knitted, a look of solemn importance about his tightly-closed lips, and his silk gown curving out behind him like a great black sail. He had little imperious ways in court, too, of beckoning a client to come to him from the well, or of waving back a timid junior who had plucked his gown to draw his attention to some suggestion with a brusque 'Not now – I can't hear that now!' which suggested immeasurable gulfs between himself and them. But at home he unbent, a little consciously, perhaps, but he did unbend – being proud and fond of his children, who at least stood in no fear of him. Long years of successful practice had had a certain narrowing effect upon him; the things of his profession were almost foremost in his mind now, and when he travelled away from them he was duller than he once promised to be – his humour had slowly dwindled down until he had just sufficient for ordinary professional purposes, and none at all for private consumption.

In his favour it may be added that he was genial to all whom he did not consider his inferiors, a good though not a demonstrative husband; that as a lawyer he was learned without the least pedantry; and that he was a Bencher of his Inn, where he frequently dined, and a Member of Parliament, where he never spoke, even on legal matters.

Mabel's quick eyes were the first to notice a shade on his face and a constraint in his manner; she went to his side and said in an undertone, 'You are not feeling ill, papa, are you, or has anything worried you to-day?'

'I am quite well. I have news to tell you presently,' he said in the same tone.

'Come and see my Christmas cards before I do them up,' said Dolly from a side-table; 'I'm going to send one to each of my friends, except Clara Haycraft, or if I *do* send her one,' she added thoughtfully, 'it will be only a penny one, and I shall write her name on the back so that she can't use it again. Clara has not behaved at all well to me lately. If I sent one to Vincent now, papa, would he get it in time?'

'No – no,' said her father, a little sharply, 'and look here, Pussy, run away now and see how Colin is getting on.'

'And come back and tell you?' inquired Dolly; 'very well, papa.'

'Don't come back till I send for you,' he said. 'Mind that now, Dolly, stay in the schoolroom.'

He shut the door carefully after her, and then, turning to his wife and daughter, he said, 'You haven't either of you seen the papers to-day, I suppose?'

'No,' said Mrs. Langton; 'you know I never read daily papers. Gerald,' she cried suddenly, with a light coming into her eyes, 'is another judge dead?' Visions of her husband on the Bench, a town-

house in a more central part of London, an increase of social consideration for herself and daughters, began to float into her brain.

'It's not that – if there was, I'm not likely to be offered a judgeship just yet; it's not good news, Belle, I'm afraid it's very bad,' he said warningly, 'very bad indeed.'

'Oh, papa,' cried Mabel, 'please don't break it to us – tell it at once, whatever it is!'

'You must let me choose my own course, my dear; I am coming to the point at once. The "Globe" has a telegram from Lloyd's agent reporting the total loss of the "Mangalore."'

'Vincent's ship!' said Mabel. 'Is – is he saved?'

'We cannot be certain of anything just yet – and – and these disasters are generally exaggerated in the first accounts, but I'm afraid there is very grave reason to fear that the poor boy went down with her – not many passengers were on board at the time, and only four or five of them were saved, and they are women. We can hope for the best still, but I cannot after reading the particulars feel any confidence myself. I made inquiries at the owners' offices this afternoon, but they could tell me very little just yet, though they will have fuller information by to-morrow – but from what they did say I cannot feel very hopeful.'

Mabel hid her face, trying to realise that the man who had sat opposite to her there scarcely a month ago, with the strange, almost prophetic, sadness in his eyes, was lying somewhere still and white, fathoms deep under the sea – she was too stunned for tears just yet.

'Gerald,' said Mrs. Langton, 'Vincent is drowned – I'm sure of it. I feel this will be a terrible shock to me by-and-by; I don't know when I shall get over it – poor, poor dear fellow! To think that the last time I saw him was that evening we dined at the Gordons' – you remember, Gerald, a dull dinner – and he saw me into the carriage, and stood there on the pavement saying good-bye!' Mrs. Langton seemed to consider that these circumstances had a deep pathos of their own; she pressed her eyes daintily with her handkerchief before she could go on. 'Why didn't he sail by one of the safe lines?' she murmured; 'the P. and O. never lost a single life; he might have gone in one of them and been alive now!'

'My dear Belle,' said her husband, 'we can't foresee these things, it – it *was* to be, I suppose.'

'Is nothing more known?' said Mabel, with a strong effort to control her voice.

'Here is the account – stay, I can give you the effect of it. It was in the Indian Ocean, not long after leaving Bombay, somewhere off the Malabar coast; and the ship seems to have grazed a sunken reef, which ripped a fearful hole in her side, without stopping her course. They were not near enough to the land to hope to reverse the engines and back her on shore at full speed. She began to settle down fast by the head, and their only chance was in the boats, which unfortunately had nearly all become jammed in the davits. Every one appears to have behaved admirably. They managed at last to launch one of the boats, and to put the women into it; and they were trying to get out the others, when the vessel went down suddenly, not a quarter of an hour after striking the reef.'

'Vincent could swim, papa,' said Mabel, with gleaming eyes.

'He was not a first-rate swimmer,' said Mr. Langton, 'I remember that, and even a first-rate swimmer would have found it hard work to reach the shore, if he had not been drawn down with the ship, as seems to have been the fate of most of the poor fellows. Still of course there is always hope.'

'And he is dead! Vincent dead! It seems so hard, so very, very sad,' said Mabel, and began to cry softly.

'Cry, darling,' said Mrs. Langton, 'it will do you good. I'm sure I wish *I* could cry like that, it would be such a relief. But you know papa says we may hope yet; we won't give up all hope till we're obliged to; we must be brave. You really don't care about coming in to dinner? You won't have a little something sent up to your room? Well, I feel as if food would choke me myself, but I must go in to keep papa company. Will you tell this sad news to Dolly and Colin, and ask Fräulein to keep them with her till bedtime? I can't bear to see them just yet.'

Mr. Langton's decorous concern did not interfere with his appetite, and Mrs. Langton seemed rather relieved at being able to postpone her grief for the present, and so Mabel was left to break the disaster, and the fate there was too much reason to fear for Vincent, to her younger brother and sister – a painful task, for Holroyd had been very dear to all three of them. Fräulein Mozer, too, wept with a more than sentimental sorrow for the young man she had tried to help, who would need her assistance never again.

The tidings had reached Mark early that same afternoon. He was walking home through the City from some 'holiday-classes' he had been superintending at St. Peter's, when the heading 'Loss of a passenger steamer with – lives' on the contents-sheets of the evening papers caught his eye, and led him, when established with a 'Globe' in one of the Underground Railway carriages, to turn with a languid interest to the details. He started when he saw the name of the vessel, and all his indifference left him as he hurriedly read the various accounts of the disaster, and looked in vain for Vincent's name amongst the survivors.

The next day he, too, went up to the owners' offices to make inquiries, and by that time full information had come in, which left it impossible that any but those who had come ashore in the long-boat could have escaped from the ship. They had remained near the scene of the wreck for some time, but without picking up more than one or two of the crew; the rest must all have been sucked down with the ship, which sank with terrible suddenness at the last.

Vincent was certainly not amongst those in the boat, while, as appeared from the agent's list, he was evidently on board when the ship left Bombay. It was possible to hope no longer after that, and Mark left the offices with the knowledge that Holroyd and he had indeed taken their last walk together; that he would see his face and take his hand no more.

It came to him with a shock, the unavoidable shock which a man feels when he has suddenly to associate the idea of death with one with whom he has had any intimacy. He told himself he was sorry, and for a moment Vincent's fate seemed somehow to throw a sort of halo round his memory, but very soon the sorrow faded, until at last it became little more than an uneasy consciousness that he ought to be miserable and was not.

Genuine grief will no more come at command than genuine joy, and so Mark found, not without some self-reproach; he even began to read 'In Memoriam' again with the idea of making that the keynote for his emotions, but the passionate yearning of that lament was pitched too high for him, and he never finished it. He recognised that he could not think of his lost friend in the way their long intimacy seemed to demand, and solved the difficulty by not thinking of him at all, compounding for his debt of inward mourning by wearing a black tie, which, as he was fond of a touch of colour in his costume, and as the emblem in question was not strictly required of him, he looked upon as, so to speak, a fairly respectable dividend.

Caffyn heard the news with a certain satisfaction. A formidable rival had been swept out of his path, and he could speak of him now without any temptation to depreciate his merits, so much so that when he took an opportunity one day of referring to his loss, he did it so delicately that Mabel was touched, and liked him better for this indication of feeling than she had ever been able to do before.

Her own sorrow was genuine enough, requiring no artificial stimulus and no outward tokens to keep it alive, and if Vincent could have been assured of this it would have reconciled him to all else. No callousness nor forgetfulness on the part of others could have had power to wound him so long as he should live on in the memory of the girl he had loved.

But it is better far for those who are gone that they should be impervious alike to our indifference and our grief, for the truest grief will be insensibly deadened by time, and could not long console the least exacting for the ever-widening oblivion.

CHAPTER IX. A TURNING-POINT

MARK came down to the little back parlour at Malakoff Terrace one dull January morning to find the family already assembled there, with the exception of Mrs. Ashburn, who was breakfasting in bed – an unusual indulgence for her.

'Mark,' said Trixie, as she leaned back in her chair, and put up her face for his morning greeting, 'there's a letter for you on your plate.'

It was not difficult to observe a suppressed excitement amongst all the younger members of his family concerning this letter; they had finished their breakfast and fallen into some curious speculations as to Mark's correspondent before he came in. Now three pairs of eyes were watching him as he strolled up to his seat; Mr. Ashburn alone seemed unconscious or indifferent.

Of late Mark had not had very many letters, and this particular one bore the name of 'Chilton & Fladgate' on the flap of the envelope. The Ashburns were not a literary family, but they knew this as the name of a well-known firm of publishers, and it had roused their curiosity.

Mark read the name too. For a moment it gave him a throb of excitement, the idea coming to him that, somehow, the letter concerned his own unfortunate manuscripts. It was true that he had never had any communication with this particular firm, but these wild vague impressions are often independent of actual fact; he took it up and half began to open it.

Then he remembered what it probably was, and, partly with the object of preserving Vincent's secret still as far as possible, but chiefly, it must be owned, from a malicious pleasure he took in disappointing the expectation he saw around him, put the letter still unopened in his pocket.

'Why don't you open it?' asked Trixie impatiently, who was cherishing the hope that some magnificent literary success had come at last to her favourite brother.

'Manners,' explained Mark, laconically.

'Nonsense,' said Trixie, 'you don't treat us with such ceremony as all that.'

'Not lately,' said Mark; 'that's how it is – it's bad for a family to get lax in these little matters of mutual courtesy. I'm going to see if I can't raise your tone – this is the beginning.'

'I'm sure we're very much obliged to you,' from Martha; 'I'm quite satisfied with my own tone, it's quite high enough for me, thank you.'

'Yes, I forgot,' said Mark, 'I've heard it very high indeed sometimes. I wronged you, Martha. Still, you know, we might (all except *you*, Martha) be more polite to one another without causing ourselves any internal injury, mightn't we?'

'Well, Mark,' said Trixie, 'all you have to do is to ask our leave to open the letter, if you're really so particular.'

'Is that in the Etiquette Book?' inquired Mark.

'Don't be ridiculous – why *don't* you ask our leave?'

'I suppose because I want to eat my breakfast – nothing is so prejudicial, my love, to the furtherance of the digestive process as the habit of reading at meals, any medical man will tell you that.'

'Perhaps,' suggested Martha, 'Mark has excellent reasons for preferring to read his letter alone.'

'Do you know, Martha,' said Mark, 'I really think there's something in that?'

'So do I,' said Martha, 'more than you would care for us to know, evidently; but don't be afraid, Mark, whether it's a bill, or a love-letter, or another publisher's rejection; we don't want to know your secrets – do we, Cuthbert?'

'Very amiable of you to say so,' said Mark. 'Then I shan't annoy you if I keep my letter to myself, shall I? Because I rather thought of doing it.'

'Eh? doing what? What is Mark saying about a letter?' broke in Mr. Ashburn. He had a way of striking suddenly like this into conversations.

'Somebody has written me a letter, father,' said Mark; 'I was telling Martha I thought I should read it – presently.'

But even when he was alone he felt in no hurry to possess himself of the contents. 'I expect it's the usual thing,' he thought. 'Poor Vincent is out of all that now. Let's see how they let him down!' and he read: —

'Dear Sir, — We have read the romance entitled "Glamour" which you have done us the honour to forward some time since. It is a work which appears to us to possess decided originality and merit, and which may be received with marked favour by the public, while it can hardly fail in any case to obtain a reception which will probably encourage its author to further efforts. Of course, there is a certain risk attending its reception which renders it impossible for us to offer such terms for a first book as may be legitimately demanded hereafter for a second production by the same pen. We will give you ...' (and here followed the terms, which struck Mark as fairly liberal for a first book by an unknown author). 'Should you accept our offer, will you do us the favour to call upon us here at your earliest convenience, when all preliminary matters can be discussed.

'We are, &c.,

'Chilton & Fladgate.'

Mark ran hurriedly through this letter with a feeling, first of incredulous wonder, then of angry protest against the bull-headed manner in which Fortune had dealt out this favour.

Vincent had been saved the dreary delays, the disappointments and discouragements, which are the lot of most first books; he had won a hearing at once – and where was the use of it? no praise or fame among men could reach him now.

If he had been alive, Mark thought bitterly; if a letter like this would have rescued him from all he detested, and thrown open to him the one career for which he had any ambition, he might have waited for it long and vainly enough. But he began by being indifferent, and, if Fortune had required any other inducement to shower her gifts on him, his death had supplied it.

He chafed over this as he went up to the City, for there was another holiday-class that day at St. Peter's; he thought of it at intervals during the morning, and always resentfully. What increased his irritation above everything was the fact that the publishers evidently regarded *him* as the author of the book, and he would have the distasteful task put upon him of enlightening them.

When the day's duties were over he found himself putting on his hat and coat in company with the Rev. Mr. Shelford, who was also in charge of one of the classes formed for the relief of parents and the performance of holiday work, and the two walked out together; Mark intending to call at once and explain his position to Messrs. Chilton & Fladgate.

'What are you going to do with yourself, Ashburn, now?' said Mr. Shelford in his abrupt way as they went along. 'Going to be a schoolmaster and live on the *crambe repetita* all your life, hey?'

'I don't know,' said Mark sullenly; 'very likely.'

'Take my advice (I'm old enough to offer it unasked); give yourself a chance while you can of a future which won't cramp and sour and wear you as this will. If you feel any interest in the boys –'

'Which I don't,' put in Mark.

'Exactly, which you don't – but if you did – I remember *I* did once, in some of 'em, and helped 'em on, and spoke to the headmaster about 'em, and so on. Well, they'll pass out of your class and look another way when they meet you afterwards. As for the dullards, they'll be always with you, like the poor, down at the bottom like a sediment, sir, and much too heavy to stir up! I can't manage 'em now, and my temper gets the better of me, God forgive me for it, and I say things I'm sorry for and

that don't do me or them any good, and they laugh at me. But I've got my parish to look after; it's not a large one, but it acts as an antidote. You're not even in orders, so there's no help for you *that* way; and the day will come when the strain gets too much for you, and you'll throw the whole thing up in disgust, and find yourself forced to go through the same thing somewhere else, or begin the world in some other capacity. Choose some line in which hard work and endurance for years will bring you in a more substantial reward than that.'

'Well,' said Mark, for whom this gloomy view of his prospects reflected his own forebodings, 'I am reading for the Bar. I went up for my call-examination the other day.'

'Ah, is that so? I'm glad to hear of it; a fine profession, sir; constant variety and excitement – for the pleader, that is to say' (Mr. Shelford shared the lay impression that pleading was a form of passionate appeal to judge and jurymen), 'and of course you would plead in court. The law has some handsome prizes in its disposal, too. But you should have an attorney or two to push you on, they say. Perhaps you can count on that?'

'I wish I could,' said Mark, 'but the fact is my ambition doesn't lie in a legal direction at all. I don't care very much about the Bar.'

'Do you care very much about anything? Does your ambition lie anywhere?'

'Not now; it did once – literature, you know; but that's all over.'

'I remember, to be sure. They rejected that Christmas piece of yours, didn't they? Well, if you've no genuine talent for it, the sooner you find it out the better for you. If you feel you've something inside of you that must out in chapters and volumes, it generally comes, and all the discouragement in the world won't keep it down. It's like those stories of demoniacal possession in the "Anatomy" – you know your Burton, I daresay? Some of the possessed brought "globes of hair" and "such-like baggage" out of themselves, but others "stones with inscriptions." If the demon gets too strong for you, try and produce a stone with a good readable inscription on it – not three globes of hair for the circulating libraries.'

'We shall see,' said Mark laughing. 'I must leave you here. I have an appointment with Chilton & Fladgate just by.'

'Ay, ay,' said the old gentleman, wagging his head; 'publishers, aren't they? Don't tell me your ambition's dead if it's taken you as far as that. But I won't ask any more questions. I shall hope to be able to congratulate you shortly. I won't keep you away from your publishers any longer.'

'They are not my publishers yet,' said Mark; 'they have made me some proposals, but I have not accepted them at present.'

He knew what a false impression this would leave with his companion, bare statement of fact as it was, but he made it deliberately, feeling almost as much flattered by the unconscious increase of consideration in the other's voice and manner as if there had been the slightest foundation for it.

They said good-bye, and the old clergyman went on and was swallowed up in the crowd, thinking as he went, 'Publishing, eh? a good firm, too. I don't think he could afford to do it at his own expense. Perhaps there's more ballast in him after all than I gave him credit for. I can't help liking the young fellow somehow, too. I should like to see him make a good start.'

Mark, having sent up his name by one of the clerks behind the imposing mahogany counters, was shown through various swinging glass doors into a waiting-room, where the magazines and books symmetrically arranged on the table gave a certain flavour of dentistry to the place.

Mark turned them over with a quite unreasonable nervousness, but the fact was he shrank from what he considered the humiliation of explaining that he was a mere agent; it occurred to him for the first time, too, that Holroyd's death might possibly complicate matters, and he felt a vague anger against his dead friend for leaving him in such a position.

The clerk returned with a message that Mr. Fladgate would be happy to see Mark at once, and so he followed upstairs and along passages with glimpses through open doors of rooms full of clerks and desks, until they came to a certain room into which Mark was shown – a small room with

a considerable litter of large wicker trays filled with proofs, packets and rolls of manuscripts of all sizes, and piles of books and periodicals, in the midst of which Mr. Fladgate was sitting with his back to the light, which was admitted through windows of ground-glass.

He rose and came forward to meet Mark, and Mark saw a little reddish-haired and whiskered man, with quick eyes, and a curious perpendicular fold in the forehead above a short, blunt nose, a mobile mouth, and a pleasantly impulsive manner.

'How do you do, Mr. Beauchamp?' he said heartily, using the *nom de plume* with an air of implied compliment; 'and so you've made up your mind to entrust yourself to us, have you? That's right. I don't think you'll find any reason to regret it, I don't indeed.'

Mark said he was sure of that.

'Well, now, as to the book,' continued Mr. Fladgate; 'I've had the pleasure of looking through it myself, as well as Mr. Blackshaw, our reader, and I must tell you that I agree with him in considering that you have written a very remarkable book. As we told you, you know, it may or may not prove a pecuniary success, but, however that may be, my opinion of it will remain the same; it ought, in my judgment, to ensure you a certain standing at once – at once.'

Mark heard this with a pang of jealousy. Long before, he had dreamed of just such an interview, in which he should be addressed in some such manner – his dream was being fulfilled now with relentless mockery!

'But there is a risk,' said Mr. Fladgate, 'a decided risk, which brings me to the subject of terms. Are you satisfied with the offer we made to you? You see that a first book –'

'Excuse me for one moment,' said Mark desperately, 'I'm afraid you imagine that – that *I* wrote the book?'

'That certainly was my impression,' said Mr. Fladgate, with a humorous light in his eye; 'the only address on the manuscript was yours, and I came to the not unnatural conclusion that Mr. Ashburn and Mr. Beauchamp were one and the same. Am I to understand that is *not* the case?'

'The book,' said Mark – what it cost him to say this, – 'the book was written by a friend of mine, who went abroad some time ago.'

'Indeed? Well, we should prefer to treat with him in person, of course, if possible.'

'It isn't possible,' said Mark, 'my friend was lost at sea, but he asked me to represent him in this matter, and I believe I know his wishes.'

'I've no doubt of it; but you see, Mr. – Mr. Ashburn, this must be considered a little. I suppose you have some authority from him in writing, to satisfy us (merely as a matter of business) that we are dealing with the right person?'

'I have not indeed,' said Mark, 'my friend was very anxious to retain his incognito.'

'He must have been – very much so,' said Mr. Fladgate, coughing; 'well, perhaps you can bring me some writing of his to that effect? You may have it among your papers, eh?'

'No,' said Mark, 'my friend did not think it necessary to give me one – he was anxious to –'

'Oh, quite so – then you can procure me a line or two perhaps?'

'I told you that my friend was dead,' said Mark a little impatiently.

'Ah, so you did, to be sure, I forgot. I thought – but no matter. Well, Mr. Ashburn, if you can't say anything more than this – anything, you understand, which puts you in a position to treat with us, I'm afraid – I'm *afraid* I must ask time to think over this. If your friend is really dead, I suppose your authority is determined. Perhaps, however, his – *ahem* – anxiety to preserve his incognito has led him to allow this rumour of his death to be circulated?'

'I don't think that is likely,' said Mark, wondering at an undercurrent of meaning in the publisher's tone, a meaning which had nothing sinister in it, and yet seemed urging him to contradict himself for some reason.

'That is your last word, then?' said Mr. Fladgate, and there was a sharp inflection as of disappointment and irritation in his voice, and the fold in his forehead deepened.

'It must be,' said Mark, rising, 'I have kept you too long already.'

'If you really *must* go,' said Mr. Fladgate, not using the words in their conventional sense of polite dismissal. 'But, Mr. Ashburn, are you quite sure that this interview might not be saved from coming to nothing, as it seems about to do? Might not a word or two from you set things right again? I don't wish to force you to tell me anything you would rather keep concealed – but really, this story you tell about a Mr. Vincent Beauchamp who is dead only ties our hands, you understand – ties our hands!'

'If so,' said Mark, uncomfortably, 'I can only say I am very sorry for it – I don't see how I can help it.'

He was beginning to feel that this business of Holroyd's had given him quite trouble enough.

'Now, Mr. Ashburn, as I said before, I should be the last man to press you – but really, you know, *really*– this is a trifle absurd! I think you might be a little more frank with me, I do indeed. There is no reason why you should not trust me!'

Was this man tempting him, thought Mark. Could he be so anxious to bring out this book that he was actually trying to induce him to fabricate some story which would get over the difficulties that had arisen?

As a mere matter of fact, it may be almost unnecessary to mention that no such idea had occurred to worthy Mr. Fladgate, who, though he certainly was anxious to secure the book if he could, by any legitimate means, was anything but a publishing Mephistopheles. He had an object, however, in making this last appeal for confidence, as will appear immediately; but, innocent as it was, Mark's imagination conjured up a bland demon tempting him to some act of unspeakable perfidy; he trembled – but not with horror. 'What do you mean?' he stammered.

Mr. Fladgate gave a glance of keen amusement at the pale troubled face of the young man before him. 'What do I mean?' he repeated. 'Come, I've known sensitive women try to conceal their identity, and even their sex, from their own publishers; I've known men even persuade themselves they didn't care for notoriety – but such a determined instance of what I must take leave to call the literary ostrich I don't think I ever *did* meet before! I never met a writer so desperately anxious to remain unknown that he would rather take his manuscript back than risk his secret with his own publisher. But don't you see that you have raised (I don't use the term in the least offensively) the mask, so to speak – you should have sent somebody else here to-day if you wished to keep me in the dark. I've not been in business all these years, Mr. Ashburn, without gaining a little experience. I think, I *do* think, I am able to know an author when I see him – we are all liable to error, but I am very much mistaken if this Mr. Vincent Beauchamp (who was so unfortunately lost at sea) is not to be recovered alive by a little judicious dredging. Do think if you can't produce him; come, he's not in very deep water – bring him up, Mr. Ashburn, bring him up!'

'You make this very difficult for me,' said Mark, in a low voice; he knew now how greatly he had misjudged the man, who had spoken with such an innocent, amiable pride in his own surprising discernment; he also felt how easy and how safe it would be to take advantage of this misunderstanding, and what a new future it might open to him – but he was struggling still against the temptation so unconsciously held out to him.

'I might retort that, I think. Now, be reasonable, Mr. Ashburn. I assure you the writer, whoever he may be, has no cause to be ashamed of the book – the time will come when he will probably be willing enough to own it. Still, if he wishes to keep his real name secret, I tell him, through you, that he may surely be content to trust that to us. We have kept such secrets before – not very long, to be sure, as a general rule; but then that was because the authors usually relieved us from the trouble – the veil was never lifted by us.'

'I think you said,' began Mark, as if thinking aloud, 'that other works by – by the same author would be sure of acceptance?'

'I should be very glad to have an opportunity, in time, of producing another book by Mr. Vincent Beauchamp – but Mr. Beauchamp, as you explained, is unhappily no more. Perhaps these are earlier manuscripts of his?'

Mark had been seized with the desire of making one more attempt, in spite of his promise to his uncle, to launch those unhappy paper ships of his – 'Sweet Bells Jangled' and 'One Fair Daughter.' For an instant it occurred to him that he might answer this last question in the affirmative; he had little doubt that if he did his books would meet with a very different reception from that of Messrs. Leadbitter and Gandy; still, that would only benefit Holroyd – not himself, and then he recollected, only just in time, that the difference in handwriting (which was very considerable) would betray him. He looked confused and said nothing.

Mr. Fladgate's patience began to tire. 'We don't seem to be making any way, do we?' he said, with rather affected pleasantry. 'I'm afraid I must ask you to come to a decision on this without any more delay. Here is the manuscript you sent us. If the real author is dead we are compelled to return it with much regret. If you can tell me anything which does away with the difficulty, this is the time to tell it. Of course you will do exactly as you please, but after what you have chosen to tell us we can hardly see our way, as I said, to treat with you without some further explanation. Come, Mr. Ashburn, am I to have it or not?'

'Give me a little time,' said Mark faintly, and the publisher, as he had expected, read the signs of wavering in his face, though it was not of the nature he believed it to be.

Mark sat down again and rested his chin on his hand, with his face turned away from the other's eyes. A conflict was going on within him such as he had never been called upon to fight before, and he had only a very few minutes allowed him to fight it.

Perhaps in these crises a man does not always arrange pros and cons to contend for him in the severely logical manner with which we find him doing it in print. The forces on the enemy's side can generally be induced to desert. All the advantages which would follow if he once allowed himself to humour the publisher's mistake were very prominently before Mark's mind – the dangers and difficulties kept in the background. He was incapable of considering the matter coolly; he felt an overmastering impulse upon him, and he had never trained himself to resist his impulses for very long. There was very little of logical balancing going on in his brain; it began to seem terribly, fatally easy to carry out this imposition. The fraud itself grew less ugly and more harmless every instant.

He saw his own books, so long kept out in the cold by ignorant prejudice, accepted on the strength of Holroyd's 'Glamour,' and, once fairly before the public, taking the foremost rank in triumph and rapidly eclipsing their forerunner. He would be appreciated at last, delivered from the life he hated, able to lead the existence he longed for. All he wanted was a hearing; there seemed no other way to obtain it; he had no time to lose. How could it injure Holroyd? He had not cared for fame in life; would he miss it after his death? The publishers might be mistaken; the book might be unnoticed altogether; *he* might prove to be the injured person.

But, as Mr. Fladgate seemed convinced of its merit, as he would evidently take anything alleged to come from the same source without a very severe scrutiny, there was nothing for it but to risk this contingency.

Mark was convinced that publishers were influenced entirely by unreasoning prejudices; he thoroughly believed that his works would carry all before them if any firm could once overcome their repugnance to his powerful originality, and here was one firm at least prepared to lay that aside at a word from him. Why should he let it go unsaid?

The money transactions caused him the most hesitation. If he took money for another man's work, there was a name, and a very ugly name, for that. But he would *not* keep it. As soon as he learnt the names of Holroyd's legal representatives, whoever they might be, he would pay the money over to them without mentioning the exact manner in which it had become due. In time, when he

had achieved a reputation for himself, he could give back the name he had borrowed for a time – at least he told himself he could do so.

He stood in no danger of detection, or, if he did, it was very slight. Vincent was not the man to confide in more than one person; he had owned as much. He had been reticent enough to conceal his real surname from his publishers, and now he could never reveal the truth.

All this rushed through his mind in a hurried, confused form; all his little vanities and harmless affectations and encouragements of false impressions had made him the less capable of resisting now.

'Well?' said Mr. Fladgate at last.

Mark's heart beat fast. He turned round and faced the publisher. 'I suppose I had better trust you,' he said awkwardly, and with a sort of shamefaced constraint that was admirably in keeping with his confession, though not artificial.

'I think so. Then you are the man – this book "Glamour"'s your own work?'

'If you must have it – yes,' said Mark desperately.

The words were spoken now, and for good or ill he must abide by them henceforth to the end.

CHAPTER X. REPENTE TURPISSIMUS

NO sooner had Mark declared himself the author of his dead friend's book than he would have given anything to recall his words, not so much from conscience (though he did feel he had suddenly developed into a surprisingly finished scoundrel), as from a fear that his lie might after all be detected. He sat staring stupidly at Mr. Fladgate, who patted him on the shoulder with well-meant encouragement; he had never seen quite so coy an author before. 'I'm very glad to make Mr. Vincent Beauchamp's acquaintance – at last,' he said, beaming with honest pride at the success of his tactics, 'and now we can come to terms again.'

He did not find Mark more difficult to deal with than most budding authors, and in this case Mark was morbidly anxious to get the money part of the transaction over as soon as possible; he could not decide whether his conscience would be better or worse satisfied if he insisted on the best pecuniary terms he could obtain, so in his indecision he took the easier course of agreeing to everything.

'About the title now?' said Mr. Fladgate, when the terms had been reduced to a formal memorandum. 'I don't think I quite like your present one; too moonshiny, eh?'

Mark owned that it did sound a little moonshiny.

'I think, too, I rather think, there's something very like it out already, and that may lead to unpleasantness, you know. Now, can you suggest something else which will give a general idea of the nature of the book?'

As Mark had absolutely no idea what the book was about, he could not.

'Well, Mr. Blackshaw suggested something like "Enchantment," or "Witchery."'

'I don't care about either of those,' said Mark, who found this sort of dissembling unexpectedly easy.

'No,' said Mr. Fladgate, 'No. I think you're right. Now, I had a notion – I don't know what you will think of it – but I thought you might call it "A Modern Merlin," eh?'

'"A Modern Merlin,"' repeated Mark thoughtfully.

'Yes, it's not *quite* the right thing, perhaps, but it's taking, I think, taking.'

Mark said it was taking.

'Of course *your* hero is not exactly a magician, but it brings in the "Vivien" part of the story, don't you see?' Of course Mark did not see, but he thought it best to agree. 'Well,' continued Mr. Fladgate, who was secretly rather proud of his title, 'how does it strike you now? it seems to me as good a title as we are likely to hit upon.'

After all, Mark thought, what did it matter? it wasn't his book, except in name. 'I think it's excellent,' he said, 'excellent; and, by the way, Mr. Fladgate,' he added, 'I should like to change the *nom de plume*: it's a whim of mine, perhaps, but there's another I've been thinking lately I should like better.'

'By all means,' said the other, taking up a pencil to make the necessary alteration on the manuscript, 'but why not use your real name? I prophesy you'll be proud of that book some day; think over it.'

'No,' said Mark, 'I don't wish my real name to appear just yet' (he hardly knew why; perhaps a lingering sense of shame held him back from this more open dishonesty). 'Will you strike out "Vincent Beauchamp," and put in "Cyril Ernstone," please?' For 'Cyril Ernstone' had been the pseudonym which he had chosen long ago for himself, and he wished to be able to use it now, since he must not use his own.

'Very well, then, we may consider that settled. We think of bringing out the book as soon as possible, without waiting for the spring season; it will go to press at once and we will send you the proofs as soon as we get them in.'

'There's one thing, perhaps, I'd better mention,' said Mark suddenly; after he had turned to go a new danger had occurred to him, 'the handwriting of the manuscript is not mine. I – I thought it as well to tell you that beforehand; it might lead to mistakes. I had it copied out for me by – by a friend.'

Mr. Fladgate burst out laughing. 'Pardon me,' he said, when he had finished, 'but really I couldn't help it, you do seem to have been so bent on hoodwinking us.'

'And yet you have found me out, you see,' said Mark, with a very unmirthful smile.

Mr. Fladgate smiled, too, making a little gesture of his hand, thinking very possibly that few precautions could be proof against his sagacity, and they parted.

Mark went down the stairs and through the clerks' room into the street, with a dazed and rather awestruck feeling upon him. He hardly realised the treachery he had been guilty of, the temptation had burst upon him so suddenly, his fall had been made so easy for him, that he scarcely felt his dishonour, nor was he likely to feel it very keenly so long as only good results should flow from it. But he was vaguely conscious that he was not the same Mark Ashburn who had parted from old Shelford not an hour ago in the street there; he was a man with a new hope in his breast, and it might be a new fear, but the hope was near and bright, the fear shadowy and remote as yet: he had only to keep his own counsel and be patient for a while, and the course of events would assuredly bring him the stake he had played so high for.

At home that evening he took down his manuscript novels (which of course he had *not* burnt) and read them again carefully. Yes; there was power in them, he felt it, a copious flow of words, sparkling wit, and melting pathos. The white heat at which the lines were written surprised even himself. It was humiliating to think that without the subterfuge that had been forced upon him he might have found it impossible to find publishers who would appreciate these merits, for after Messrs. Leadbitter & Gandy's refusal he had recognised this to the full; but now, at least, they were insured against any such fate. A careful reading was absolutely necessary to a proper estimation of them, and a careful reading they had never had as yet, and would receive at last, or, if they did not, it would only be because the reputation he had appropriated would procure them a ready acceptance without any such preliminary ordeal. The great point gained was that they would be published, and after that he feared nothing.

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