relieve it, and yet shrank from being the first to speak in her fear of jarring him.

Mark spoke at last.

"Well, Mabel," he said, looking down at her with a rather doubtful smile, "I told you that my mother was a—a little peculiar."

"Yes," said Mabel frankly; "we didn't quite get on together, did we, Mark? We shall some day, perhaps; and even if not—I shall have you!" And she laid her hand on his sleeve with a look of perfect understanding and contentment which, little as he deserved it, chased away all his fears.

CHAPTER XXIII

CLEAR SKY—AND A THUNDERBOLT

"HAS any one," asks George Eliot, in 'Middlemarch,' "ever pinched into its pilulous smallness the cobweb of pre-matrimonial acquaintance?" And, to press the metaphor, the cobweb, as far as Mark and Mabel were concerned, brilliantly as it shone in all its silken irridescence, would have rolled up into a particularly small pill. Mark was anxious that his engagement should be as short as possible, chiefly from an uneasy fear that his great happiness might elude him after all. The idea of losing Mabel became day by day, as he knew her better, a more intolerable torture, and he could not rest until all danger of that was at an end. Mabel had no fears of a future in which Mark would be by her side; and if she was not blind to some little weaknesses in his character, they did not affect her love and admiration in the least—she was well content that her hero should not be unpleasantly perfect. And the weeks slipped by, until Easter, which fell early that year, had come and gone; the arrangements for the wedding were all completed, and Mark began to breathe more freely as he saw his suspense drawing to a happy end.

It was a bleak day towards the end of March, and Mark was walking across the Park and Gardens from his rooms in South Audley Street to Malakoff Terrace, charged with a little note from Mabel to Trixie, to which he was to bring back an answer; for, although Mabel had not made much progress in the affections of the rest of the

Ashburn household, a warm friendship had sprung up already between herself and Mark's youngest sister—the only one of them who seemed to appreciate and love him as he deserved. He felt buoyant and happy as he walked briskly on, with the blustering north-easter at his back seeming to clear his horizon of the last clouds which had darkened it. A very few days more and Mabel would be his own—beyond the power of man to sunder! and soon, too, he would be able to salve the wound which still rankled in his conscience—he would have a book of his own. "Sweet Bells Jangled" was to appear almost immediately, and he had come to have high hopes of it; it looked most imposing in proof—it was so much longer than "Illusion"; he had worked up a series of such overwhelming effects in it; its pages contained matter to please every variety of taste—flippancy and learning, sensation and sentiment, careful dissection of character and audacious definition and epigram—failure seemed to him almost impossible. And when he could feel able to lay claim legitimately to the title of genius, surely then the memory of his fraud would cease to reproach him—the means would be justified by the result. He amused himself by composing various critiques on the book (all, of course, highly eulogistic), and thus pleasantly occupied the way until he gained the cheerful Kensington High Street, the first half of which seems to belong to some bright little market town many miles further from Charing Cross. In the road by the kerbstone he passed a street singer, a poor old creature in a sun-bonnet, with sharp features that had been handsome once, and brilliant dark eyes, who was standing there unregarded, singing some long-forgotten song with the remnant of a voice. Mark's happiness impelled him to put some silver into her hand, and he felt a half-superstitious satisfaction as he heard the blessing she called down on him—as if she might have influence.

No one was at home at Malakoff Terrace but Trixie, whom he found busily engaged in copying an immense plaster nose.

"Jack says I must practice harder at features before I try the antique," she explained, "and so he gave me this nose; it's his first present, and considered a very fine cast, Jack says."

"Never saw a finer nose anywhere," said Mark—"looks as if it had been forced, eh, Trixie?"

"Mark, don't!" cried Trixie, shocked at this irreverence; "it's *David's*—Michael Angelo's David!" He gave her Mabel's note. "I can't write back because my hands are all charcoaly," she explained; "but you can say, 'My love, and I will if I possibly can'; and, oh yes, tell her I had a letter from *him* this morning."

"Meaning Jack?" said Mark. "All right, and—oh, I say, Trixie, why won't the governor and mater come to my wedding?"

"It's all ma," said Trixie; "she says she should only feel herself out of place at a fashionable wedding, and she's better away."

"It's to be a very quiet affair, though, thank Heaven!" observed Mark.

"Yes, but don't you see what she really wants is to be able to feel injured by being out of it all—if she can, she'll persuade herself in time that she never was invited at all; you know what dear ma is!"

"Well," said Mark, with considerable resignation, "she must do as she pleases, of course. Have you got anything else to tell me, Trixie, because I shall have to be going soon?"

"You mustn't go till I've given you something that came for you—oh, a long time ago, when ma was ill. You see, it was like this; ma had her breakfast in bed, and there was a tray put down on the slab where it was, and it was sticky underneath or something, and so it stuck to the bottom, and the tray wasn't wanted again, and Ann, of course, didn't choose to wash it, so she only found it yesterday and brought it to me."

"Trixie," said Mark, "I can't follow all those 'its.' I gather that I'm entitled to something sticky, but I haven't a notion what. Hadn't you better get it, whatever it happens to be?"

"Why, it's a letter, of course, goose!" said Trixie. "I told you *that* the very first thing: wait here, and I'll bring it to you."

So Mark waited patiently in the homely little back parlour where he had prepared his work as a schoolboy in the old days, where he had smoked his first cigar in

his Cambridge vacation. He smiled as he thought how purely intellectual his enjoyment of that cigar had been, and how for the first time he had appreciated the meaning of "the bitter end"; he was smiling still when Trixie returned.

"Whom do you know in India, Mark?" she said curiously; "perhaps it's some admirer who's read the book. I hope it's nothing really important; if it is, it wasn't our fault—Mark, you're not *ill*, are you?"

"No," said Mark, placing himself with his back to the light, and stuffing the letter, after one hasty glance at the direction, unopened into his pocket. "Of course not—why should I be?"

"Is there anything in the letter to worry you?" persisted Trixie. "It can't be a bill, can it?"

"Never mind what it is," said Mark; "have you got the keys? I—I should like a glass of wine."

"Ma left the keys in the cupboard," said Trixie; "how lucky! Port or sherry, Mark?"

"Brandy, if there is any," he said with an effort.

"Brandy! oh, Mark, have you taken to drinking spirits, and so early in the morning?" she asked, with an anxious misgiving that perhaps that was *de rigueur* with all literary men.

"No, no, don't be absurd. I want some just now; and quick, do you hear? I caught a chill walking across," he explained.

"You had better try to eat something with it, then," she advised; "have some cake?"

"Do you want to make me ill in earnest?" he retorted peevishly, thrusting away the brown cake, with a stale flavour of cupboard about it, with which Trixie tried to tempt him; "there, it's all right—there's nothing the matter, I tell you." And he poured out the brandy and drank it. There was a kind of comfort, or rather distraction, in the mere physical sensation to his palate; he thought he understood why some men took to drinking. "Ha!" and he made a melancholy attempt at the sigh of satisfaction which some people think is expected of them after spirits. "Now I'm a man again, Trixie; that has driven off the chill. I'll be off now."

"Are you *sure* you're quite well again?" she said

anxiously. "Very well, then I shan't see you again till you're in church next Tuesday; and oh, Mark, I do so hope you'll be very, very happy!" He was on the doorstep by this time, and made no reply, while he kept his face turned from her.

"Good-bye, then," she said; "you won't forget my message to Mabel, will you?"

"Let me see, what was it?" he said. "Ah, I remember; your love, and you will if you can, eh?"

"Yes, and say I've had a letter from him this morning," she added.

He gave a strange laugh, and then, as he turned, she saw how ghastly and drawn his face looked.

"Have you, though?" he said wildly; "so have I, Trixie, so have I!" And before she could ask any further questions he was gone.

He walked blindly up the little street and into the main road again, unable at first to think with any clearness; he had not read the letter; the stamp and handwriting on the envelope were enough for him. The bolt had fallen from a clear sky, the thing he had only thought of as a nightmare had really happened—the sea had given up its dead! He went on; there was the same old woman in the sun-bonnet, still crooning the same song; he laughed bitterly to think of the difference in his own life since he had last seen her—only a short half-hour ago. He passed the parish church, from which a wedding party was just driving, while the bells clashed merrily under the graceful spire—no wedding bells would ever clash for him now. But he must read that letter and know the worst. Holroyd was alive—that he knew; but had he found him out? Did that envelope contain bitter denunciations of his treachery? Perhaps he had already exposed him! He could not rest until he knew how this might be, and yet he dared not read his letter in the street. He thought he would find out a quiet spot in Kensington Gardens, and read it there; alone—quite alone. He hurried on, with a dull irritation that the High Street should be so long and so crowded, and that everybody should make such a point of getting in the way; the shock had affected his body as well as his mind; he was cold to the bones, and felt a dull, numbing pressure on

the top of his head ; and yet he welcomed these symptoms, too, with an odd satisfaction ; they seemed to entitle him to some sympathy. He reached the Gardens at last, but when he had turned in at the little postern door near the " King's Arms " he could not prevail upon himself to open the letter—he tore it half open and put it back irresolutely ; he must find a seat and sit down. He struck up the hill, with the wind in his teeth now, until he came to the Round Pond, where there was quite a miniature sea breaking on the south-western rim of the basin ; a small boy was watching a solitary ship labouring far out in the centre, and Mark stood and watched it too, mechanically, till he turned away at last with a nervous start of impatience. Once he had sailed ships on those waters ; what would he not give if those days would come back to him again, or even if he could go back these past few months to the time when his conscience was clear and he feared no man ! But the past was irrevocable ; he had been guilty of this reckless, foolish fraud, and now the consequences were upon him ! He walked restlessly on under the bare, tossing branches, looking through the black trunks and across the paths glimmering white in the blue-grey distance for a seat where he might be safe from interruption, until at last he discovered a clumsy wooden bench, scored and slashed with the sand-ingrained initials of a quarter of a century's idleness, a seat of the old, uncomfortable pattern gradually dying out from the walks. He could wait no longer, and was hurrying forward to secure it, when he was hailed by some one approaching by one of the Bayswater paths, and found that he had been recognised by Harold Caffyn.

CHAPTER XXIV

Mark knows the Worst

To avoid Caffyn was out of the question, and so Mark waited for him with as much self-control as he could muster as he strolled leisurely up. Caffyn's quick eye saw at once that something unusual had happened, and he resolved to find out what that was before they parted.

"Thought it must be you," he began; "so you've come out here to meditate on your coming happiness, have you? Come along and pour out some of your raptures; it will do you good, and you don't know what a listener I can be."

"Not now," said Mark uneasily; "I—I think I would rather be alone."

"Nonsense!" said Caffyn briskly; "you don't really mean that, I know. Why, I'm going away to-morrow to the lakes. I must have a little talk with you before I go."

"What are you going there for?" said Mark, without much show of interest.

"My health, my boy; old Featherstone has let me out for a fortnight's run, and I'm going to see what mountain air can do for me."

"And where are you going now?" asked Mark.

"Now? Well, I *was* going across to see if the Featherstones would give me some lunch, but I'm in no hurry. I'll go wherever *you* want to go."

"Thanks," said Mark, "but—but I won't take you out of your way."

"It's not taking me out of my way a bit, I assure you, my boy, and we haven't had a talk together for ages, so come along."

"I can't," said Mark, more uncomfortably still. "I have some—some business which I must see to alone."

"Odd sort of place this for business! No, no, Master Mark, it won't do; I've got you, and I mean to stick to you; you know what a tactless beggar I can be when I like. Seriously, do you think I can't see there's something wrong? I'm hanged if I think it's safe to let you go about alone while you're looking like this; it isn't any—any hitch at Kensington Park Gardens, is it?" and there was a real anxiety in his tone as he asked this.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Taliput Bungalow, Newera Ellia,
"Ceylon.

"MY DEAR MARK,—I am not going to reproach you for your long silence, as I dare say you waited for me to write first. I have been intending to write again and again, and have been continually prevented, but I hardly expected to hear from you unless you had anything of importance to tell me. Something, however, has just come to my knowledge here which makes me fancy that you might have other reasons for not writing." ("What does he mean by that?" thought Mark in sudden terror, and for a moment dared not read on.) "Have you by some strange chance been led to believe that I was on board the unfortunate 'Mangalore' at the time of the disaster, because I see, on looking over some old Indian papers

at the club here, that my name appears on the list of missing. As a matter of fact, I left the ship at Bombay. I had arranged to spend a day or two with some people, old friends of my father's, who have a villa on the Malabar Hill, but on my arrival there found a telegram from Ceylon, warning me to lose no time if I wished to see my father alive. The 'Mangalore' was to stop several more days at Bombay, and I decided to go on at once overland to Madras and take my chance there of a steamer for Colombo, leaving my hosts to send down word to the ship of my change of plan. I can only suppose that there was some misunderstanding about this, and even then I cannot understand how the steward could have returned me as on board under the circumstances; but if only the mistake has given you no distress it is not of much consequence, as I wrote since my arrival here to the only other quarter in which the report might have caused alarm. To continue my story, I was fortunate enough to catch a boat at Madras, and so reached Colombo some time before the 'Mangalore' was due there, and as I went on at once to Yatagalla, it is not to be wondered at if in that remote part of the country—up in Oudapusilava, in the hill district—it was long before I even heard of the wreck. There was not much society there, as you may imagine, the neighbouring estates being mostly held by native planters or managers, with whom my father had never, even when well, been at all intimate. Well, my poor father rallied a little and lingered for some time after my arrival. His condition required my constant care, and I hope I was able to be of some comfort to him. When he died I thought it best to do what I could, with the overseer's assistance, to carry on the plantation until there was a good opportunity of disposing of it, and for a time it did seem as if my efforts were going to be rewarded—the life was hard and lonely enough, but it had its charms for a solitary man like myself. Then everything seemed to go wrong at once. We had a bad season to begin with, and next fungus suddenly showed itself on the estate, and soon spread to such an extent that as a coffee plantation the place is quite worthless now, though I dare say they will be able to grow tea or cinchona on it. I have done with Yatagalla myself, having just succeeded

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

The letter ended rather abruptly, the writing becoming almost illegible towards the close, as if the writer's strength had gradually failed him. Mark came to the end with a feeling that was almost relief; his chief dread had been to hear that he was found out, and that his exposure might be made public before he could make Mabel his own. It was terrible to know that the man he had injured was alive, but still it was something that he was still unaware of his injury; it was a respite, and, to a man of Mark's temperament, that was much. Even if Holroyd were strong enough to take his passage by the "Coromandel," he could hardly be in England for at least another fortnight, and long before he arrived at Plymouth the

wedding would have taken place. And in a fortnight he might be able to hit upon something to soften some of the worst aspects of his fraud; the change in the title of the book, in the *nom de guerre*, and even the alterations of the text might be explained; but then there was that fatal concession of allowing his real name to appear: it was, he knew, to be placed on the title-page of the latest edition—would there be time to suppress that? This occurred to him but vaguely, for it seemed just then as if when Mabel was once his wife, no calamity could have power to harm him, and now nothing Holroyd could do would prevent the marriage. After that the Deluge!

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Easily," said Mark; "he talks of coming by the

'Coromandel' and starting about a fortnight after he wrote—so——"

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

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

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

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

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

"Capital!" murmured Mark.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No," said Mark; *I* am going to meet him. I must

be the first to see him. After that, if he likes to go away with you, he can."

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

"That is my affair," said Mark.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Only for two days," he answered.

"And soon we shall be together—you and I—for all our lives," she said softly, with a great happiness in her

low tones. "I ought to be able to give you up for just two days, Mark!"

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

It was a miserably cold day when he left Paddington, and he shivered under his rug as he sat in the train. He could hardly bear the cheerful talk of meeting or parting friends at the various stations at which the train stopped. He would have welcomed a collision which would deal him a swift and painless death, and free him from the misery he had brought upon himself. He would have been glad, like the lover in "The Last Ride Together"—although for very different reasons—if the world could end that day, and his guilt be swallowed up in the sum of iniquity. But no collision occurred, and (as it is perhaps unnecessary to add) the universe did not gratify him by dissolving on that occasion. The train brought him safely to the Plymouth platform, and left him there to face his difficulty alone. It was about six o'clock in the evening, and he lost no time in inquiring at his hotel for the P. and O. agents, and in making his way to their offices up the stony streets and along a quiet lane over the hill by Hoegate. He was received with courtesy and told all that he wished to know. The "Coromandel" was not in yet; would not be in now until after dark—if then. They would send him word if the tender was to go out the next morning, said the agent as he wrote him the necessary order to go on board her. After that Mark went back to the hotel and dined—or rather attempted to dine—in the big coffee-room by the side of a blazing

fire that was powerless to thaw the cold about his heart, and then he retired to the smoking-room, which he had all to himself, and where he sat staring grimly at the leather benches and cold marble-topped tables around him, while he could hear muffled music and applause from the theatre hard by, varied by the click of the balls in the billiard-room at the end of the corridor. Presently the waiter announced a messenger for him, and on going out into the hall he found a man of seafaring appearance, who brought him a card stating that the tender would leave the Millbay Pier at six the next morning, by which time the "Coromandel" would most probably be in. Mark went up to his bedroom that night as to a condemned cell; he dreaded another night of sleepless tossing. Sleep came to him, however, merciful and dreamless, as it will sometimes to those in desperate case, but he yielded to it with terror as he felt it coming upon him—for it brought the morning nearer.

CHAPTER XXV

On Board the "Coromandel"

It was quite dark the next morning when the hammering of the "boots," outside the door roused Mark to a miserable sense of the unwelcome duty before him. He dressed by candlelight, and, groping his way down the silent staircase, hunted about in the shuttered coffee-room for the coat and hat he had left there, and went shivering out into the main street, from which he turned up the hill towards the Hoe. The day had dawned by that time, and the sky was a gloomy grey, varied towards the horizon by stormy gleams of yellow; the prim clean streets were deserted, save by an occasional workman going to his labours with a heavy tramp echoing on the wet flags. Mark went along by terraces of lodging-houses, where the placards of "apartments" had an especially forlorn and futile look against the drawn blinds, and from the areas of which the exhalations, confined during the night, rose in perceptible contrast with the fresh morning air. Then he found himself upon the Hoe, with its broad asphalt promenades and rows of hotels and terraces, rain-washed, silent, and cold,