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,

and, descending the winding series of steps, he made his way to the Millbay Pier, and entered the Custom House gates. Waiting about the wharf was a little knot of people, apparently bound on much the same errand as himself—although in far higher spirits. Their cheerfulness (probably a trifle aggravated by the consciousness of being up so early) jarred upon him, and he went on past them to the place where two small steamers were lying.

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

"That ain't her," said another man, who was leaning over the side of one of the tenders, "that's the t'other one—the 'Emu'; the 'Coromandel's' a three-master, *she* is."

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

Presently the agent appeared, and Mark, having satisfied himself that there was no danger of being taken out to the wrong vessel (for, much as he dreaded meeting Holroyd, he dreaded missing him even more), went on board one of the tenders, which soon after began to move out into the dull green water. Now that he was committed to the ordeal his terrors rose again; he almost wished that he had made a mistake after all, and was being taken out to meet the wrong P. and O. The horrible fear possessed him that Holroyd might in some way have learned his secret on the voyage home. Suppose, for instance, a fellow-passenger possessed a copy of "Illusion," and chanced to lend it to him—what should he do if his friend were to meet him with a stern and contemptuous repulse, rendering all conciliation out of the question? Tortured by speculations like these, he kept nervously away from the others on board, and paced restlessly up and down near the bows; he saw nothing consciously then, but afterwards every detail of those terrible ten minutes came back to him vividly, down to the lights still hanging in the

rigging in harbour, and the hoarse cries of the men in a brown-sailed lugger gliding past them out to sea. Out by the bar there was a light haze, in the midst of which lay the long black hull of the "Coromandel," and to this the tender worked round in a tedious curve preparatory to lying alongside. As they passed under the stern Mark nerved himself to look amongst the few figures at the gangway for the face he feared—but Holroyd was not amongst them. After several unsuccessful attempts of a Lascar to catch the rope thrown from the tender, accompanied by some remarks in a foreign language on his part which *may* have been offered in polite excuse for his awkwardness, the rope was secured at length, the tender brought against the vessel's side, and the gangway lashed across. Then followed a short delay, during which the P. and O. captain, in rough-weather costume, conversed with the agent across the rails with a certain condescension.

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

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

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

"All well on board."

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

There were glad greetings going on all around him, confused questions and answers, rapid directions to which no one had time to attend, and now and then an angry exclamation over the eagerly read letters: "And where's mother living now?" "We've lost that 7.40 express all through that infernal tender!" "Look here, don't take that bag up on deck to get wet, d'ye hear?" "Jolly to be back in the old place again, eh?" "I wish I'd never

left it—that d——d scoundrel has gone and thrown all those six houses into Chancery ! " and so on, those of the passengers who were not talking or reading being engaged in filling up the telegraph forms brought on board for their convenience. Mark extricated nimself from the hubbub as soon as he could, and got hold of the steward. There was a gentleman on board of the name of Holroyd ; he seemed well enough, as far as the steward knew, though a bit poorly when he first came aboard, to be sure ; he was in his berth just then getting his things together to go ashore, but he'd be up on deck directly. Half sick and half glad at this additional delay, Mark left the saloon and lingered listlessly about above, watching the Lascars hauling up baggage from the hold—they would have been interesting enough to him at any other time, with their seamed bilious complexions of every degree of swarthiness, set off by the touches of colour in their sashes and head coverings, their strange cries and still more uncouth jocularity—but he soon tired of them, and wandered aft, where the steamer-chairs, their usefulness at an end for that voyage, were huddled together dripping and forlorn on the damp red deck.

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

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

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

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

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

" I'm quite real, however," said Holroyd, laughing ;

"there's more of me now than when they carried me on board from Colombo; don't look so alarmed—the voyage has brought me round again. I am my old self again."

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

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

On the tender, such acquaintances as Holroyd had made during the voyage gave Mark no chance of private conversation with him, and even when they had landed and cleared the Custom House, Mark made no use of his opportunity; he knew he must speak soon, but he could not tell him just then, and accordingly put off the evil hour by affecting an intense interest in the minor incidents of the voyage, and in Vincent's experiences of a planter's life. It was the same in the hotel coffee-room, where some of the "Coromandel's" passengers were breakfasting near them, and the conversation became general; after breakfast, however, Mark proposed to spend some time in seeing the

place, an arrangement which he thought would lead the way to confession. But Holroyd would not hear of this ; he seemed possessed by a feverish impatience to get to London without delay, and very soon they were pacing the Plymouth railway platform together waiting for the up train, Mark oppressed by the gloomy conviction that if he did not speak soon, the favourable moment would pass away, never to return.

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

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

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

" Thanks," said Holroyd gratefully ; " it's very kind of you to think of that, old fellow ; I will come to you, then—but there is a house I must go to as soon as we get in ; you won't mind if I run away for an hour or two, will you ? "

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

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

In that letter which had fallen into Caffyn's hands Holroyd had told Mabel the love he had concealed so long ; he had begged her not to decide too hastily ; he would wait any time for her answer, he said, if she did not feel able to give it at once ; and in the meantime she should be troubled by no further importunities on his part. This was not, perhaps, the most judicious promise to make ; he had given it from an impulse of consideration for her, being well aware that she had never looked upon him as a possible lover, and that his declaration would come upon her with a certain shock. Perhaps, too, he wanted to leave himself a margin of hope as long as possible to make his exile

endurable; since for months, if no answer came back to him, he could cheat himself with the thought that such silence was favourable in itself; but even when he came to regret his promise, he shrank from risking all by breaking it. Then came his long illness, and the discovery at Newera Ellia; for the first time he thought that there might be other explanations of the delay, and while he was writing the letter which had come to Mark, he resolved to make one more appeal to Mabel, since it might be that his first by some evil chance had failed to reach her. That second appeal, however, was never made. Before he could do more than begin it, the fever he had never wholly shaken off seized him again and laid him helpless, until, when he was able to write once more, he was already on his way to plead for himself. But the dread lest his own punctilious folly and timidity had closed the way to his heart's desire had grown deeper and deeper, and he felt an impulse now which was stronger than his natural reserve to speak of it to some one.

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

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

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

"Never," said Mark. He felt that fate was too hard for him; he had honestly meant to confess all up to that moment, he had thought to found his strongest plea for forbearance on his approaching marriage. How could he do that now? What mercy could he expect from a rival? He was lost if he was mad enough to arm Holroyd with such a weapon; he was lost in any case, for it was certain that the weapon would not lie hidden long; there were four days still before the wedding—time enough for the

mine to explode! What could he do? How could he keep the other in the dark, or get rid of him, before he could do any harm? And then Caffyn's suggestions came back to him. Was it possible to make use of Caffyn's desire for a travelling companion, and turn it to his own purpose? If Caffyn was so anxious to have Holroyd with him in the Lakes, why not let him? It was a desperate chance enough, but it was the only one left to him; if it failed, it would ruin him, but that would certainly happen if he let things take their course; if it succeeded, Mabel would at least be his. His resolution was taken in an instant, and carried out with a strategy that gave him a miserable surprise at finding himself so thorough a Judas.

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

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

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

When he returned he found that Holroyd had secured an empty compartment in the train which was preparing to start, and Mark got in with a heavy apprehension of the danger of a long journey alone with Holroyd. He tried to avoid conversation by sheltering himself behind a local journal, while at every stoppage he prayed that a stranger might come to his rescue. He read nothing until a paragraph, copied from a London literary paper, caught his eye. "We understand," the paragraph ran, "that the new novel by the author of 'Illusion,' Mr. Cyril Ernstone (or rather Mr. Mark Ashburn, as he has now declared himself), will be published early in the present spring, and it is rumoured that the present work will show a marked advance on its predecessor." It was merely the usual puff preliminary,

though Mark took it as a prediction, and at any other time would have glowed with anticipated triumph. Now it only struck him with terror. Was it in Holroyd's paper too? Suppose he asked to look at Mark's, and saw it there, and questioned him, as of course he would! What should he say? Thinking to avoid this as far as possible, he crumpled up the tell-tale paper and hurled it out of the window; but his act had precisely the opposite effect, for Holroyd took it as an indication that his companion was ready for conversation, and put down the paper he had been pretending to read.

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

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

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

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

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

"Go on," said Holroyd.

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

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

Mark felt that he was among pitfalls.

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

"It came back, then?"

"Yes, it came back. There—there was no letter with

it; the girl at the lodgings found the manuscript lying about. She—she burnt it."

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

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

Mark was seized with a remorse which almost drove him to confess all and take the consequences; but Holroyd had sunk back to his position by the window again, and there was a fixed frown on his face which, although it only arose from painful thought, effectually deterred Mark from speaking. He felt now that everything depended on Caffyn. He sat looking furtively at the other now and then, and thinking what terrible reproaches those firm lips might utter; how differently the sad, kind eyes might regard him before long, and once more he longed for a railroad crash which would set him free from his tangled life. The journey ended at last, and they drove to South Audley Street. Vincent was very silent; in spite of his philosophical bearing, he felt the blow deeply. He had come back with ideas of a possible literary career before him, and it was hard to resign them all at once. It was rather late in the afternoon when they arrived, and Caffyn was there to receive them; he was delighted to welcome Holroyd, and his cordiality restored the other to cheerfulness; it is so pleasant to find that one is not forgotten—and so rare. When Vincent had gone upstairs to see his sleeping-room, Caffyn turned to Mark; there was a kind of grin on his face, and yet a certain admiration too.

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

"I thought over what you said," returned Mark, "and—

—and he told me something which would make it very awkward and—and painful for him, and for myself too, if he remained."

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

"Nothing," said Mark.

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

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

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

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

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

"Are they all there?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Rather," said Caffyn; "brilliant match in its way, I

understand. Not much money on his side, but one of the coming literary fellows, and all that kind of thing, you know; just the man for that sort of girl. Didn't you know about it?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Caffyn smiled in spite of himself.

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

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

"I see," he said, with a change in his voice, "I shall only be in the way here, then." Mark said nothing—he could not. "Well, Caffyn, I'll come with you; the Lakes will do as well as any other place for the short time I shall be in England."

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

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

"To Ceylon!" cried Mark, with hopes that had grown quite suddenly. Was it, could it be, possible that the

threatened storm was going to pass away—not for a time, but altogether ?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Caffyn himself was evidently disturbed.

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

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

CHAPTER XXVI

The Way of Transgressors

Dolly's mere appearance in the room would lead Vincent to suspect that he had been deceived; her first words would almost inevitably expose the fraud. She was coming up, nevertheless, and Mark felt powerless to prevent her—he could only indulge himself in inwardly cursing Caffyn's ingenuity and his own weakness for having brought him to

such a pass as this. Caffyn was shaken for the moment, but he soon recovered himself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why?" said Dolly, with a joy suddenly checked— she scarcely knew why.

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

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

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

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

"Ah, but you see she *don't* know," said Caffyn. "Do you suppose if she had known who the letter was from and

what it was about she would have taken it so quietly? Why, she thinks it was only an old envelope you burnt—I heard her say so—you know she still believes Vincent is dead. She doesn't know the truth yet, but Vincent will tell her. Are you coming up to see him?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Quite so," agreed Caffyn. "Now, really, that's very nice and considerate of you to think of that, Ashburn. I like to see that sort of thing in a fellow, you know; shows

he isn't spoilt by success! Well, you can rely on me—I won't breathe a word to suggest your being in any way connected with pen and ink."

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

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

At dinner he felt himself able, now that his fears were removed, to encourage conversation, and drew from Holroyd particulars of his Ceylon life, which supplied them with topics for that evening, and prevented the meal from becoming absolutely dull, even though it was at no time remarkable for festivity.

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

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

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

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

He fell back into a moody silence again. Perhaps, after all, his silence had arisen from other causes still; perhaps, as his health declined, he had come to find a morbid satisfaction in the idea that he was alone—forgotten by those he cared for—until his very isolation had become dear to him. He had been a fool—he knew that now—his two friends had mourned him sincerely, and would have been

overjoyed to hear that he was alive. He had wronged them—what if he had wronged Mabel too? Another had won her, but had not his own false delicacy and perverted pride caused him to miss the happiness he hungered for? "At all events," he thought, "I won't whine about it. Before I go out again I will know the worst. If the other man is a good fellow, and will make her happy, I can bear it." But deep down in his heart a spark of hope glimmered still.

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

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

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

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

Mark breathed more freely again. He accompanied Caffyn down to the front door, and then, as they stood for a moment in the little passage, each looked at the other strangely.

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

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

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

"It—it seems a good opening," said Mark hastily, not

without some shame at himself; "perhaps the sooner it is arranged the better, don't you think?"

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

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

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

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

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

"No, no, it's all right," said Mark trembling; "how do you do, uncle? I—I'd rather you didn't talk about—about that here—nor quite so loud!"

"Well, I don't know what there is in that to be ashamed of," said his uncle; "and if I mayn't be allowed to talk about a wedding—which but for me, mind yer, would 'a'

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

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

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

Mark laughed naturally and easily enough.

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

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

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

" I wasn't asking the gentleman to buy no rubbish," said

the man at the bookstall, resenting the imputation. " This is a book which is 'aving a large sale just now ; we've sold as many as "—but here Mark succeeded in getting Vincent away and bringing him up to his uncle.

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

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

" Oh, " said Uncle Solomon, with a tolerant wave of his hand, " I don't object to that, yer know, I've no objection to that—not that I don't think (between ourselves, mind yer) that he mightn't be better employed just now ; " and here, to Mark's horror, he winked with much humorous suggestiveness at both of them.

" That is very likely," said Holroyd.

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

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

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

Mark could stand no more of this.

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

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

" Lurch is a good old English word, let me tell yer, Mr. Schoolmaster that was," he broke in ; " and if I'd——"

Here a small Juggernaut car in the shape of a high-piled truck came rolling down on them with a shout of, " By your leave there, by your leave ! " from the unseen porter

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

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

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

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

"Why, there you are, uncle—eh?" he said, with much

innocent satisfaction. " I couldn't think where you'd got to."

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

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

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

" Do you mean Caffyn ? " asked Mark.

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

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

" You stick to that then, and—'ullo, there *is* Budkin come at last ! You come along with me and I'll introduce you (he's not what you call a refined sort of feller, yer know," he explained forbearingly, " but still we've always been friends in a way) ; you can't stop ? Must go back to Miss Mabel, hey ? Well, well, I won't keep yer ; good-bye till the day after to-morrow then."

When Mark made his appearance at Kensington Park Gardens again, Dolly watched his face anxiously, longing to ask if Vincent had really gone at last, but somehow she

was afraid. And so, as the time went by, and no Vincent Holroyd came to the door to denounce her, she took comfort, and never knew how her fears were shared by her new brother-in-law.

CHAPTER XXVII

AGAG

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